

THIRD WORLD

TRAVEL POEMS

by

E.A.LACEY

BLACKY'S IMAGE LOUNGE

Jakarta, 2002

FORESKIN TO THE SECOND EDITION

Ed's dead, and that's a sincere loss to both humanity and literature. Frankly it's not much of a loss to the gentleman himself, as I shall elaborate for the patient reader forthwith.

My rôle in the affair: I hand-made about 30 of the dead man's books in a "First Edition", even before he did his sorry mahasamadhi, and in an offhand and somewhat defeatist manner tried to get them distributed, read and commented on. Maybe I should go knock my head on a large rock instead. Poetry, even gay travel poetry, is not so much fun to snare people's interest with.

So what am I doing now, with a Second Edition? Well, a few feeble flickers of interest have arisen in the meantime, and the first 30 copies are gone. Life is short and arse is long. Hope Ed, wherever he's shoveling coal, appreciates the efforts I am making on his behalf, ha. Anjing.

The Gay 90s have come to their bittersweet, little-expected fake orgasm, and a [phony Xtian] new Millennium is supposedly upon us. With the advent of new numbers we are promised novel and uproarious forms of gaiety. Yours truly the Editor is still in genteel hiding, nested in Muslim Southeast Asia, a comfortable self-imposed exile. Why bother when all you are awarded is arrogance, rejection or simply blithe ignorance, being ignored, for all your troubles. Better to enjoy life while it is sweet.

So THIRD WORLD. I do hope you can empathize with the miserable and self-torturing son-of-a-bitch who wrote it. Fine poet, amazing intellect, great guy – but after seeing what became of him in those final years it was most probably a case of good riddance, for all concerned. Still the book is definitely worth the read. Enjoy the man's work and keep in touch.

Byron Black, Jakarta 2002

PREPUCE TO THE FIRST EDITION

Ed Lacey acquiesced in allowing me to publish this edition of **THIRD WORLD** during his residence at my villa in the Condet Forest of East Jakarta in 1990. He had passed on to me a faint set of these poems -- photocopies of carbon copies -- with a desultory gesture of sincere disinterest. This ever more powerful attitude was typical of this particular vertebrate mammal, as we rushed at the end of the Century.

Ed had had it with the Planet Earth and all its idiosyncrasies. I wouldn't call him burned out -- worn out, perhaps, the emotions spent on lost civilizations, lost wild boys. I think back to Errol Flynn, who suffered a sudden heart attack and died in Vancouver. It was 1959, and very proper, and the decent British wood-hewing and water-carrying folk were properly shocked that this notorious Corrupter of Youth (though Beverley Aadland was 23, as a matter of fact) would be so indecorous as to die in their prim seaside city.

Now the Coroner, a Mr. Harmon, was quoted by the Vancouver **SUN** as saying "Errol Flynn had the body of a man of seventy." I'd say that by the time Ed Lacey, corrupted by youth, passed these poems into my care, "He had the psyche of a man of a hundred and seventy."

I'm being very plain about this guy, my pal since we were mates at school in 1961. And this might not please all: there are mutual acquaintances who don't like to face the reality I'm describing, who rather continue to stress how "gifted this man has been" and "what those gifts can accomplish". True. He has a very splendid body of work: **PATH OF SNOW**, **THE FORMS OF LOSS** and **LATER**, his earlier books of poems, hold up very well through the years. And his various translations are matchless.

But these ephemeral "gifts" won't cough up any more. **THIRD WORLD** is, I would surmise, the swan song for this particular turkey.

How is it, one ponders, that such a **committed** (if pickled) citizen as Edward Alan Lacey (check the poems, check the persona) could become so pointedly unconcerned with what novel treasures of experience might be born to him in these Gay Nineties, covered with slime and blood and squalling loudly?

Well, I do miss his stimulating, prickly, ironic company. But Ed has, alas, walked this planet, and tolerated this incarnation, all too long, which is something difficult to accept for those who have not known him from so far back, or so well.

Now, back in the first paragraph, I said that the author "acquiesced" in this release, and I put it that way because by the time I got a look at

these poems Ed was quite plainly not interested in what might become of them (or him). Not a flicker of interest in seeing a new book in print, nor had he considered trying to get a Canada Council grant, no move to do more writing, or translation, or travel, or meeting people -- he was past that. By the time I arranged the teaching job for him in Jakarta, which was, by the way, his one and only avenue of escape from Canada (see last poem in the book, ha ha), he had taken on a morose, sour, uncommunicative and pointedly uninteresting attitude. No longer was he a creature of this world and its peoples, engaged in its struggles, possessed of mighty opinions and committed views on its creatures. He'd had it. But he wasn't yet dead -- and there was the paradox. It was, and continues to be (he's not dead yet), a profoundly inconvenient position in which to find himself.

"Not dead yet". That's been one continually-running subplot of our long relationship. All these years since I first met Ed, at the University of Texas for the Criminally Insane, in 1960, he and I have been expecting to hear that the other has come to a brutal and violent end. For him it was to have been cut, shot, or beaten to death by one of the Latino rough trade maniacs he was so fond of entrusting himself to, drunken and myopic (hundreds of opticians shed grateful tears whenever he'd show up in a city -- he lost more pairs of glasses than has a fly eyes). My fate was to have been knocked down and savaged by a bus, truck or sturdy oak tree, which I'd inadvertently intercept at high speed on one of the many motorcycles I rode and raced. Ed disliked motorcycles, hated speed, along with his disdain for a galaxy of other aspects of contemporary society (the only one he wholeheartedly approved of being air conditioning!), and even refused to ride on the back of a motorcycle. This became an aversion he had to force down -- like many others -- when he came to reside in Southeast Asia.

The thought of racing such a machine at high speed, which has given me such delicious terror and pleasure over the years, he found incomprehensible.

In this and in so many other ways were we so very unlike. Had we not met at UT in 1960, when we were both (reluctantly) pursuing graduate study in Descriptive Linguistics, and had we not shared directions in forbidden sex (though with very different ideals) and Mexican border town culture, and had we not shared a circle of friends including the incomparable Randy Wicker (née Charlie Hayden, student politician destined to become gay activist and Manhattan small businessman), we would have had no reason whatsoever to pal around. We certainly didn't find each other sexually attractive: he was amused by my predilection for sucking off frisky young Latinos, and I was horrified by the brutal characters he drank with in Mexican **cantinas**, and sucked off afterwards. Both of us were repelled by and avoided **maricones**, the swishy queens who orbited the red-light zone. We liked our pals macho -- Ed wanted his boys working-class and twenty-five (check out the objects of affection in these poems) and I was charmed by the classically beautiful.

Ed's Woodrow Wilson Fellowship-sponsored graduate study came to a quick and unpleasant end when he got busted on the border for grass. Remember now that we're talking about the beginning of the Sixties, a time when Dallas stripper Candy Barr got fifteen years in the Federal Penitentiary for the possession of two joints. Here's how Ed's adventure came to pass, in typical Lacey crash-and-burn style: he was walking back across the Mexican/U.S., border after a heavy drinking exercise. There is (or was then anyway) a bridge at the Nuevo Laredo crossing, where thousands of day laborers and tourists drive and stroll across the Rio Grande. Ed was extremely drunk, and when a kindly American Customs officer spotted him and said "Son, you look like you've had a lot to drink. Why don't you sit down here a few minutes and sober up a little?" he obediently took a seat. What could have been going through that Irish Catholic Lindsay Ontario head at that moment, I do wonder. Suddenly he looks up and announces dramatically "I know what you want" and hauls out a wad of grass from his pocket, displaying it to the genuinely surprised elderly Customs man.

Now one naturally wonders, did he somehow want to get busted that day? Was it some kind of self-punishment, or avenue of escape from Graduate School, Linguistics, Texas? These questions would arise again and again, up until and including the near-fatal traffic accident, where the potential of suicide once again raised its forlorn graying head. The timing was certainly right: Ed was knocked down on the road to the end of which he had come: no money no job no lover no friends no creative spark no future.

Oh don't I wish I could quote precisely what the judge told Ed at his trial for possession of narcotics. Here was this Canadian graduate student, a nice-enough looking fellow, earnest and polite in his horn-rimmed glasses, and he was after all the recipient of a prestigious international fellowship, but he had in fact been apprehended, in a most puzzling and unlikely fashion, carrying deadly narcotics across the border from Mexico.

It was something like "Mr. Lacey, you are a most extraordinary man, but you must realize that we live in an ordinary world." Ed was quite lucky (as he was up until 1991), and got off with probation and deportation. A mutual friend (with a sharper memory) also mentioned a jump of bail as part of the excitement. You get the picture.

At this point my contact with him ended, at least in person, until he showed up at the Royal Hotel in Bangkok (the place where the fun-loving Thai Army killed all those demonstrators) in 1984. By this time of course each of us looked to the other like an actor in a high-school drama who had dusted his hair in powder and put on greasepaint to simulate wrinkles. No, I take that back -- his hair was jet-black, as he had enough sense of pride left to have it dyed frequently at the barber's. That all changed later, of course.

He had just spent ten months travelling around Sri Lanka and India, and was in a hell of a shape, miserable and paranoid: "We can say goodbye right here and now if you want that" he snapped to me at our first meeting. Astonished I was, trying to break the ice, reestablish our friendship; I even invited him to stay with me at Club Taupoon-Tang in north Bangkok, near Bangsu. I was working at the open university at this time, and Ed quickly found employment with the notorious Mr. Wong, whose TOEFL-preparation factory piped closed-circuit televised lectures to hundreds of hopefuls, and where Ed would work eighty- and ninety-hour weeks on texts, tests and the school magazine before sailing off on drinking sprees. It was this amazing theatrical behavior, actually not much more dramatic than his usual gruff, intense manner, that inspired the shooting of the footage for **E.A. Lacey**, a documentary being edited and released on videocassette about the same time as this book appears. It is mostly conversations and monologues: ah, in those days he could really talk! And he always found fascinated listeners: the boys in my house would gather round and hang on his words, even though they wouldn't understand much of what he was telling them. In that sense he was an excellent teacher, at least until the weight of experience began to lay heavy on him.

We eventually had to kick him out of our clubhouse, mostly for his own benefit. He would circulate in the neighborhood, drinking in dingy Chinese cafés, getting in arguments and losing his glasses, money and passport (how many lost at last count, Edward? Seven? Eight? Various Canadian Embassies, apparently taking him at face value, continued to issue new ones for him, before finally showing him the door, with a DO NOT PASS GO, DO NOT COLLECT \$200. item, good only for a trip back to Canada, a country whose name in Inuit means "Hell-Frozen-Over").

Marlin Oliveros, my Filipino sidekick at that time, and Joe Sein, a good pal from Karen Free State (over the border in Burma) became Ed's "nursemaids", scraping him off the street and bundling him home, undressing him and putting him to bed, time and again. Marlin got so perplexed at this that he finally hid Ed's passport and money, but that didn't stop Our Hero. He stalked out and got very drunk at a Chinese place nearby. Then he conveniently passed out. As there were no other foreigners living in that neighborhood, the proprietors of these places had no trouble finding out where he belonged. So they would phone us to come pick our bad baby up -- and pay his bill. Near the end of this struggle, in early 1986, Marlin and Joe got so annoyed that they hog-tied Ed to a post in the house when, drunk beyond belief, he announced he was ready to storm off on another bender. He never forgave them for that deprivation of his freedom: his mantra was "I never hurt anyone else." Ha ha. You won't, please observe, find a confessional poem about this infantile/alky naughtiness in this particular selection. (Meeoowww).

Another notably revealing phone call was from a citizen exemplifying what Ed called "literary friendship", insisting (correctly, as it turned out) that there was no necessity for or benefit to personal contact. He dreaded

any personal contact with the character in question, who happened to be travelling in Thailand at that moment. They went off together. I had managed to weasel out of going along, as I knew this Earthling from previous contact, and had found his company totally unprofitable: the conversation was dull and predictable, he was demanding, complained a lot and never seemed to appreciate what you did for him, and (in my eyes, most heinous of all) was unforgivably stingy, with money as with himself.

Ed evidently had a similar abreaction to the fellow: the phone rang. It was the literary giant, pleading for me to dash down to Patpong and rescue him from the poet: Ed had gone roaring drunk, loud, irascible, impossible.

Well naturally I dropped what I was doing, got dressed, mounted up and motorcycled all the way through Bangkok traffic, down to Patpong to join these two stale old queens, one of whom was incapable of handling the other. By this time, and after numerous such confrontations, my attitude toward the drunken Ed had become that of a Head Orderly: "Come on now Mr. Lacey and we'll get you changed and into bed" with a firm steering grip on the elbow and no nonsense. I would put up with no more shit from the fellow.

Here's what I found upon arriving in Patpong. We'd been to one of those clubs where the boys are go-go dancing in their birthday suits. It wasn't **Tomboy**, it had closed by then... I'd assisted with introductions (Ed, all the while a linguist, steadfastly refused to learn the tonal inflections of Thai, and thus could not communicate). The citizens in question were two fresh-faced eighteen-year-olds, who had been dancing and jacking off on a platform over the bar. It was most enjoyable to watch: while these kids were basically straight (their sturdy hardons inspired by the American fuck videos playing over video monitors all over the place), like all Thai men they were acutely narcissistic, loving to show off their lovely bodies. And very receptive of attention, flattery, gifts, smooching.

Most were hicks from the sticks. Back on the farm, the only idea they ever had of homosexuality was that observed in the animal kingdom (female water buffaloes mounting girlfriends), or UFO-sightings of shrieky transvestites in whorehouses. They generally found homosexual stimulation harmless and silly; this obsession of the foreigner was as puzzling and absurd as, say, butterfly collecting: with all the girls about, ready to spread for you, what were these crazy white guys doing paying to play on their wee-wees?

These boys mostly liked to receive attention: they would rarely deign to fuck, and rarely to be fucked; get rough with them, or demand they give you your money's worth, and they might well stick a knife in you. Work their dick and they'll shiver and shoot very nicely; but you are fervently advised not to mistake this friendly frisky response for true undying love.

Actually in my experience I often found local gentlemen who would

follow The Golden Rule, as I recite it: "Do Unto Others As You Would Have Them Do Unto You". The smart ones anyway. They receive and reciprocate with oral sex freely, as well as cuddling, kissing, and hugging - though in truth the willingness to suck is a critical element in an evening's entertainment. They could be most pleasant partners, provided the [typically] oafish Westerner did his part to amuse, tease, play with and reward them a little. The key, as always, is to keep it light and playful. For what is this eroticism without babies and social contracts but a pleasant nonsense anyway?

It's worth a little detour from our dreadful morality tale to look at just how these frisky Thai youths would end up in a lust castle on Patpong. A typical case would go this way: country boy packs up and heads for Bangkok. He's sick of the sticks and wants some big-city action. He probably knows someone already working there, in construction, or in a restaurant... though it may be a tenuous and hazy connection.

He gets off the train at Hualampong, and stands bewildered in this cavernous station, swarming with strangers.

A well-dressed middle-aged woman approaches and speaks to him, smiling. She is obviously a lady of class, and some means; and she exhibits concern for this bewildered rural youth.

He doesn't realize that this Angel of Mercy has very sharp eyes indeed, and wouldn't have beamed in on him had he looked like Mortimer Snerd or Charlie Manson or Boy George. He is young, clean-cut, well-built but not brutal-looking, masculine but possessed of a sweet, smooth, open face. She knows it's the look, and the physique, that will drive the foreign homos nuts. And as the writer of these confessions will testify, it is one of the economic foundations of the Thai nation today.

She asks where he has come from and why he is in the capital. He rather lamely explains that he has come to seek his fortune in the capital; now she can see she has made **her** jackpot.

"Would you like to come and work with me?" she asks. He is quite naturally surprised at this sudden invitation. "Doing what?" he wonders. "Being nice to people" she says. He starts to get the picture. "Stud service for old ladies?"

She smiles. "No, not quite. Rather, you'll meet nice foreign gentlemen with a lot of money, who will give you gifts, get you clothes, even perhaps arrange a passport and study overseas; they'll definitely take good care of you."

Too good to be true, you smile? Ah, Western reader, no need for such wariness. No need to be cynical. No grounds for suspicion! Our boy certainly isn't reluctant. Like all Thais, he trusts in his **karma**, knows a good

thing when one comes along, and when she tells him "You just have to let them suck your dick, and they will be so nice to you" his astonishment is only exceeded by his puzzlement. But he tags along when she beckons.

They zoom away from the train station in a lovely new air-conditioned car, to a narrow alley in Patpong. When they enter the bar it is three in the afternoon, and the first thing the boy notices is a sleepy collection of youths his own age, starting to move around and clean up the joint. New friends!

A Thai Army colonel owns the place and supervises initiations. The new boy is taught how to order drinks and nuzzle up to honkies. Then comes the astonishing part. For like all Thais he has been taught to be modest about exposing himself to others; while you will see youths frolicking near-naked in the **khlong**, or canal, they never expose their gentiles to others.

One of the **Tomboy's** boys reaches over and whips out the newcomer's dick. If he is fortunate enough to be well-hung, he is congratulated by one and all, and assured of success in business: whiteys are known to be obsessed with penis size, as if their own great flopping cocks were not big enough for them. If the boy's cock is tiny (Chinese blood, for instance, produces delicate, fine-skinned, lovely-proportioned youths, but their dicks are, alas, minuscule), it is to be regretted.

The first evening: this yahoo can barely believe his eyes. Ten of the youths he has been talking to all day are up on stage, stark naked, jacking off and dancing to disco music. He is being interfered with meekly by a dowdy if upstanding Rotarian from Missouri (wife and four children, Baptist choir leader); soon our hero will be awash in Walkmans, Wranglers, and gold chains.

The lady from the station is stuck in a traffic jam, counting her loot and planning dinner for the family.

But let us not forget our Three Stooges, tired troop of homos with local youths in tow. I refer to Lacey, Your Humble Scribbler, and Father Migraine. So here we go: the pack heads back to the Rose Hotel, where the visitor had holed up. The Rose, of all places. For the record, it is the dankest, dreariest place in the known universe the literatus in question could have chosen to roost in. At two in the morning he and Ed sit in the dingy Coffee Shop and jaw and chew over "the little bar down the street from that bus stop in Sao Paulo" or "the way they made those late-night soups in Rio" while their two sleek boys sit, ignored and bored, waiting for these two tired **farang** to get on with it.

"Get on with it!" I am thinking. "Grab your boy and squeeze him! Tickle his pickle!" I say nothing as these two wobble down memory lane. Why indeed did they bring the boys with them, if they're not going to deal

with them? What is it, a decorative gesture?

It's not long till the Acting Politburo of Blackyland gives Mr. Lacey the boot. He moves in with Khun Dean, my friend for eighteen years; I made sure I warned Dean and **his** boys what they were setting themselves up for; and sure enough their Big Bad Baby proved to be a Boring Burden. Pharp and Sak did what they could, and Dean was infinitely patient; the local Thais simply laughed when Ed would lay down for a nap in the road late at night, being incredibly tolerant of eccentricity and drunkenness. "**Farang ba**" is the universal explanation, excusing any such behavior: "Foreigner nuts". By definition.

But it was this propensity to pursue such carefree behavior, with no regard for consequences, that proved to be Ed's final undoing in sober Jakarta, and venial Bangkok, years later.

A Boy Scout is Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean and Reverent. We knew all this as we aspired to these ideals, and the mutual masturbation at Scout camp was also memorable. Alas, Mr. Lacey and Mr. Black seem to have arrived on the planet at an especially unfortunate time, growing up as homos in the Nineteen Fifties. Ed slid down the tube into a warped Irish/Anglo/Catholic/Smalltown Canada, just before World War Two. I pooped out about a year later, a Wartime Fruit Aryan, Military Gypsy baby bundled around Lana the Free and Homer the Brave: my daddy joined the United States Army Air Corps when I was but two weeks of age, and I never had roots: I lived nowhere more than eight months until I was twenty-six years of age.

Thus no less alike could these two Caucasoid/vertebrates have been, at least from the aspect of cultural stamp. Still, as products of that age, we did have some common attributes. For instance, neither of us ever felt much solidarity or kinship with the Gay Movement -- although at the tender age of seventeen I did venture to visit the drab offices of **One Magazine**, in a dumpy second-floor walkup in Los Angeles. This was more out of a sense of timid protest, coming at the tailend of the McCarthy Era, than it was of any show of brotherhood or solidarity.

Neither of us ever cherished any illusions about what a nation of queerkillers could do to us, especially in Texas, where, when I was a college student, a boy's parents got a pliant judge to have him committed to the bughouse because he had actually told them he was a **Socialist!**

Ed and I **did** commune on one fundamental aspect: we shared a sense of the underlying humour in this texture of reality. We were, after all, both of us the uneaten children of Burroughs, living in a consumeroid tyranny (me more comfortably, a lower-middle-class hillbilly hypocrite by choice, Ed roughing it, getting into tight jams, struggling against terrific odds, also by choice). While studying Linguistics at the University of Texas -- and it must be stated that he was by far the most terrific academic I

knew, far more adept in the practice than me, for instance (I was reluctantly bribed into going to Graduate School by a three-year, NDEA Fellowship in Linguistics -- after Sputnik the money was gushing -- but I preferred travel, motorcycle racing and the pursuit of the also-gushing "Fountain of Youth", so to speak).

We are consumers, consumed by the culture to a greater or lesser extent. "Peace Is Our Profession" and the Loyalty Oath, the Texas Student League for Responsible Sexual Freedom (my circle of jerks) and the dowdy black bars of East Austin (Ed's regular patrol). Austin was and is a great place to study, and a comfortable, clean and safe (at least for Texas) place to live. But for the earnest non-conformist, whether he be a culturally-warped Canadian, or a right-wing Air Force Brat turned weird, it was a trial and a struggle. At a rundown apartment complex Northwest of the campus, called "The Ghetto", someone turned an old army coffee boiler into an apparatus for distilling the elixir of knowledge: puke your guts out and see God, with the aid of peyote. I hung out with the Texas Ranger staff, including the soon-to-be-famous Gilbert Shelton, Tony Bell and Chet Helms. Janis Joplin was allegedly prowling the scene but I never remember talking to her. Not because I didn't pay any attention to her, but because she was a girl of the female sex, you see: nothing against them, but they never seemed to stick in memory the same way as my male pals. On the other hand, I do remember porking a fun lady named Agatha one evening, as an RCA 45rpm player played "The Monster Mash" over and over and over. It was nice: a lady's pussy is definitely engineered to squeeze a maximum of pleasure into the gentleman's member... but alas for me some psychic fulfilment went missing. Ed was also into diddling whores, black ones if I remember correctly; also, when we crossed into Mexico he'd occasionally slip it to a **puta** (though this was typically an act to strengthen a bond with a guy he'd met in a bar, as they screwed along together -- it was the era of furtiveness and sublimation, Neil Cassidy and that bunch, after all).

While we were both travellers, Ed was **truly** a traveller. I would end up somewhere, usually in the Third World, and set up a comfortable if predictable scene. Ed kept on the move. His letters are probably more amazing documents than his poetry, and if I can wheedle Randy Wicker and others holding the crabbed, tightly-packed cursive narratives into giving them up, I'd like to offset them and publish them as-is. Make you, dear reader, suffer the way we suffered when we tried to read them. And they were so fascinating and so funny that we never really complained.

Ed's dad died and left him money; just how much I never managed to pry out of him. Open and frank about most things, he got uncharacteristically coy when it came to his personal finances. So I naturally used to like to probe and poke around, just to tease a bit. I recall discussing this with Randy (back when he was just Charlie Hayden, a University of Texas campus politician). We figured that Ed had inherited about \$250,000, in the early 1970s, from the sale of the family home. "He could have lived on the interest alone," mused Randy. "I'm surprised he

didn't, knowing what a cheapskate he was," I agreed. Indeed, Ed had little taste for the so-called finer things of life, unlike, alas, his pal Byron. Nor was he especially generous with the boys -- though he'd always treat them fairly, and supply money in cases of genuine need.

But the fact is that he **did** dip into his principal, probably around the time he was becoming thoroughly disillusioned with his existence on this planet, and thus perceived no need to deal wisely with his portion of its bounty. And hey, a quarter of a million clams is no joke, especially in..."The Third World".

His story was that an accountant in Canada diddled him out of some of the money, but he never denied spending a lot himself. By the time he got to Thailand, and re-entered my life, in 1984, his fortune was pretty much shot. And that, as Elvis said, is when your heartaches begin.

For all those years he had not had to account to anyone else for his beliefs, behavior, customs or appearance. He had had no boss sitting on him since the early 1970s. Thus, he had over the years turned into a profoundly eccentric, intense-looking, shabbily-dressed fellow, peculiar of mannerism and abrupt of speech. He wasn't to realize it for some time, but he was a perfect specimen for Thailand. "**Farang ba!**", as stated above: the universal explanation for the crude and ill-mannered and weird ways in which outsiders behave. Ed first pointed this out to me, saying this was what had frequently saved his skin in Mexico. Since he **never** affected an effeminate manner (he even abhorred the name "Lacey"), and had such an odd way about him, most Mexicans wouldn't believe that he was a **maricón**. They simply assumed he was looney. So whatever he did, including tendering obscene invitations out of the blue to potentially homicidal maniacs in rough Mexican bars, it was taken as the ravings of a madman -- a nutty **gringo** to boot.

Ditto for the Thais. When he'd lay down in the street and go to sleep, or march up to a layabout holding up a pillar in a marketplace at four in the morning and start demanding "**Sopa! Sopa!**", people simply assumed he was entertaining some kind of psychotic episode. I have to give you some background on this particular act, as it's too good to pass up. The scene evolved out of a small dispute at the end of an evening of drinking (he drank, I watched), and pleasant conversation, when Ed suddenly realized that his heart's desire was a bowl of tripe soup. Please to understand now folks, this is Bangkok at half past three in the morning, they've rolled up the sidewalks, and most of the city **does** come to a standstill (outside of **Patpong, Soi Cowboy** and the other internationally-oriented redlight zones). I was my usual doubting, reluctant self, and tried to convince Eduardo that he wasn't going to find a streetseller with a pot of hot tripe soup at that hour. He was not to be deterred. So he marched up to the first citizen he saw and cried "**Sopa! Sopa!**" (since he didn't know the Thai word for "soup", but was convinced that **sopa**, like **stop** or **hello** or **money** was universally understood), but the dope in question simply blinked at

him, and, without a doubt, simply concluded "**Farang ba**".

Suddenly last suddenly, and it's 1988. Ed has had the bum's rush from Thailand, and is stuck in Montréal, on welfare, surviving on what should be a pleasant sort of poverty, but hating it. He is sending letters of application to various institutions, in a variety of countries, inspiring interest in none of them. Quite frankly, the man's not very marketable at this point: he's over fifty, his CV looks suspicious... there's nothing to put your finger on but language schools **do** learn to trust their intuition. And they decide not to bite.

Ed moved in with his old friend Ruth Beissel when he first got back to Canada; she described him as being thin and wobbly, in pretty rough shape (though of course nothing like what was to come). When Ed decided to telephone relatives, after many years' silence, he received the Ice Welcome, as only the Subjects in the Land of the Snow Queen can award it. They were emphatically not interested.

So it was back to Ruth's Olympian charity; now here's the picture: our stalwart World Adventurer is stuck in a tiny overstuffed apartment in Montréal. It is winter, and no money and no friends at twenty below in dour old Canada: quite a change from being a Sugar-Daddy and buying rounds of drinks for grateful sailor-boys in bars in Athens. Am I being unkind? Shit, no. I'm just talking about myself, as projected through that poor sucker and pal of mine, who I managed to rescue from a fate worse than debt: old and broke in Canada.

I offered him help with the wary compassion born of experience, securing Ed a contract with my language school in Jakarta, which hired him and flew him out when no other sentient beings on the planet Earth would touch him. Well-warned, my school was also informed that he had hopefully cleaned up his act and would be a reliable teacher, confining his drinking to the private part of his life.

Alas he was first sent to Pontianak, a Chinese port town in West Kalimantan, to work for an erratic, loony entrepreneur and his tyrannical wife. These two had stuffed a California Fried Chicken fast-food joint, a Yamaha Organ dealership, a business college, a Yamaha Organ school and oh yes an English-language school into one riotously-busy building in this Burroughsian swamp town. And with Ed's arrival they had a prize trophy: a genuine white man. **And** a real teacher.

It didn't last. He got drunk and wild and locked himself up until they agreed to let him escape by air. So it was back to Jakarta. That didn't last. He tried his best to be a responsible teacher, but students, in spite of liking and respecting him, could strongly feel there was something very troubled about this man. And it made them uneasy.

He didn't forgive me for telling him this: "You have taken away the

last of my self-confidence." Okay, Ed, but I'm like Red Skelton: I calls 'em the way I sees 'em.

The school very reluctantly let him go. It wasn't the drinking: there are a number of accomplished tipplers teaching there, in fact. It was rather the great potential for scandal that a Loose-cannon/Canuck would pose. I told Ed he could, and should, get another job in Jakarta. He could continue to live with me; I'd support his basic needs. Heading back to Bangkok was pure folly, especially in view of how much he railed against the Thais, hated Thai-Chinese food (**eats** being a monumental presence in his life, as these poems plainly show), and loathed the heat and pollution.

So he wobbled off to Thailand and got crushed half to death by a car appearing out of the night. How it happened is not too clear. When I first heard about the accident I assumed Ed had simply laid down for a nap in the road (as he was fond of doing) and a speeding automobile had simply run over him. But later I found out that he was indeed knocked down, from a semi-vertical position anyway, and then brought to the hospital by his unwitting assailant (who then sped away into the night, or, as **The Bangkok Post** is fond of putting it, "The driver fled the scene").

He was truly assumed to be a goner at this point: skull fractured, and brain damage, spinal damage, legs broken, arms injured, probable internal damage too. Not to mention being certifiably alcoholic. But this guy is, in case you had not figured it out, bullet-proof. God manufactured him out of space-age material and, at least up to that point, bestowed a charmed sort of life on him: he'd never come to grief for his accumulated folly. All those roaming years, all that hard drink, all those dangerous countries, all that rough trade.

Hubris does call in all bets, and so there he was in hospital, stuck in Bangkok with no money, few friends, and a very gaunt future. Dean and Mick were angels of mercy, visiting him every day, trying to talk with him, and supplying him with tissues, fresh fruit, and whatever the nurses asked for. The Canadian Embassy was left with the responsibility, and did its part (while bludgeoning everyone in the world who'd ever heard of him to cough up dough for his expenses). I refused to give them a thing, incidentally, as I was furious at this casual near-suicide: I felt that all his friends' "help" over the years had been casually discarded; why throw more his way?

Mick's funny yet compassionate letter captures the hospital scene better than I could possibly communicate it to you. That's why I include it in this volume. There Ed is, and when I finally met up with him and he asked me how he looked, I said "Like a man of seventy". And not a very healthy seventy-year-old, either. Worst of all, that brilliance is cracked, his speech rambles, he has lucid moments followed by non-sequiturs that betray the damage: no longer is he in this reality.

Dean Bishop confided to me that he suspects Ed's current dottiness is

also an act, to fool his friends into thinking that his crushed skull and cutup brain have him truly scrambled. Examples: assuring us in Bangkok "The doctors in this hospital speak French all day long" and "I don't remember when I came here...what month is this?" or "When do we leave Australia?" as well as the other fancies you can read about in Mick's letter, in the Appendix. I, alas, tend to think it's for real. He's fucked up for good.

Lest you think it unkind or indiscreet for me to be spilling these beans about this character and his antics, the fact is that I paid my dues for E.A.L. all through those years, taking care of the bum above and beyond the call of duty, and this goes down through history (and goes down on history) until now, as I publish this last book of his poems out of my own bare pocket. I liked him. He was a handful. He is a fine poet. He was my friend.

THIRD WORLD

Urbs Erat Olim

Green and red lights
circling the end of runway.
Shudder, a lift, a tremor of the heart,
the usual cask of spilled diamonds underneath

and then, the city was gone.

Howard Hughes, at the heart of his pyramid,
heard ice-cubes tinkle in a glass of water.

A man and his girl who did **not** happen to be making it
fell out of bed and wondered what **was** happening.

The fault line ran through the heart of the city.

Two young studs,
floating on dope and life,
stepped out of a smoky club for a breath of night air

and then, the nightclub was gone.

Cars on the highway
weaving and crashing into one another
like drunken flies.

"I told my husband, 'Let's stay in the room.
This is earthquake country. That was just a tremor.'
I went out in the hall, and a man there said
'Let me show you my room.' He opened the door
and I saw stars and the moon."

December 22, 1972.
Shortest day in the year. The longest night.
2:22 a.m. Only a heartbeat.

Now walk.
Walk with me
these grassy fields where a bemused cow grazes
in what was once Managua.

Third Street. Seventh Avenue.

Where was that bar with the chill, full steins of beer, checkerboard of
sunlight through lattices,
telephone lines where birds chattered excruciatingly at twilight?

What has become of the fat old woman who sold her mixture
of steamed rice, beans and bananas and called it "marriage"

Urbs Erat Olim (Cont.)

at the dawn market? What has become of the market ?

The lake's still there. Blue, sinister, polluted,
dead fish lining the shore.

The heat's the same: implacable, clinging peachskin.
90 degrees Fahrenheit. 90 percent humidity.
By 1 p.m. one still smells like durian.

Pale freshwater shark lurk among a thousand islands;
they still sell turtle eggs at Poneloya.
You can still climb the cindery, small volcano
and gaze down into three sulphurous lakes:
one blue, one emerald, one bilious gold
- "Mother's" true face.

The Miskitos on their Mosquito Coast
still toast the English Queen (Victoria)
with toddy. And they are Moravians.

Garrobo soup cures **any** hangover.
The green iguana's best - the crested one.

Bluefields, Greytown and Bragmann's Bluff live on
their slow Jamaican jive. Managua gone.

The cathedral remains, a long zigzag
lightning-bolt crack across its classicism.
The Corinthian-pillared Legislative Assembly
(or was it the High Court?) Such things survive,

like the glossy, mosaicked little park between them,
full of oil palms and Indian laurel trees.
Parks outlast people.

The pyramid's there too, but (how sad) that barman
who made the world's best frozen daiquiris
was crushed by falling tiles.

Tachito promoted to heaven by General Stroessner,
the Sandinistas improbably rule.

Howard Hughes, who wanted to buy Corn Island
(deporting its inhabitants, naturally)
was deported himself, to far more distant shores.

Giant coconut crabs prowl the dense night

Urbs Erat Olim (Cont.)

searching for nuts to smash in their blue pincers,
littering highways with mashed prehistoric bodies.

"My cousin was twelve. He was my only friend.
The door saved us. But a roof-beam pierced his heart."

"I still wake up at night and feel the shaking
though I know it's only my own heart." "I remember..."

**Urbs erat olim nomine Managua.
Magna et formosa et famosa fuit...**

(Note: The Managua earthquake actually occurred about 2:22 a.m. on Dec. 23, 1972, but I am taking the licence of considering the night as the extension of the previous day. I left the city a few hours before the quake, hence the opening lines. The Intercontinental Hotel, the suite at the top of which was at the time occupied by Howard Hughes - who got out of Nicaragua quickly after the earthquake - is built in the shape of the Mayan pyramid; it was one of the few buildings to survive the earthquake. The quotations are all from people I talked to, sometimes years later. Garrobo = iguana. The Miskito Indians are English- [as well as Miskito-] speaking Moravian Christians, former subjects of the British Mosquito Coast Protectorate, as are the Jamaican inhabitants of Bluefields and other Caribbean coastal towns in Nicaragua.) (Great and Little Corn Island are English-speaking Jamaican-populated islands of the Caribbean coast: the coconut crabs live there and along the coast. "Tachito" is General Anastasio Somoza, the former dictator, mysteriously murdered in Paraguay in 1980, one year after his overthrow by the Sandinistas.)

The Two Macaws

There was the shop
- a pet shop ¿te acordás, hombre José? -
on Athenai Street, just below Ommonia:
a shop full of parakeets, guppies, small macaques,
beside the vegetable market that sold kiwi fruit's
emerald antipodal testicles,
apples grown by centaurs, bananas from Crete,
rouged pomegranates, Morean tangerines...
Catcorners across from that subterranean porno theatre
where you could hear
the metro rumbling off, down to Piraeus
- the ships, the salt air and the foreign sailors -
and where young men sat all day, gently caressing
bulbous appendages deviated sideways into pockets, noiselessly squirting
the magic liquid
into sheets of Kleenex or handkerchiefs embroidered
by adoring maiden aunts.
Around the corner from the sidewalk café
- the one shaded by a great scaly plane tree
the one that sold cheap ouzo and had such good hors d'oeuvres
of octopus and potato mayonnaise -
don't you remember, José ?
And that shop, you will recall, had two macaws.
A blue-and-gold one, and a red-and-blue one.
They sat outside, taking the fruit-scented air,
dreaming of distant jungles,
chained by one foot to horizontal perches,
huge squawking sylvan birds,
balanced and swung, ate fruit and sunflower seeds,
with those murderous curved black beaks,
gentle as a child's touch,
and endlessly shrieked "Arara! Dry crackers!"
Transported from the deeps of who knows what shimmering
South American Fantasy
by some sailor, they were the only memory
each had of each. Of their lost green world.
And they had us, too. We used to go by
and joke with them, feed them pieces of fruit.
The two **araras**. The two **Guacamayas**.
After all, the two of us were just as exotic
in that city as they were. Just as colourful.
And just as alien, tropical, just as lost....

And then, one day, the blue-and-gold macaw was gone.

Sold, the shopkeeper informed me, to a rich client
who'd paid ten thousand drachmae and transported **his** bird

The Two Macaws (Cont.)

on his yacht, to Rhodes. The red-and-blue **guacamaya**
stayed on outside the shop, chained to its rod,
balanced and swung, ate fruit and sunflower seeds,
but there was no longer any sun or flower
in **that** life. It turned vicious and pecked
and only rarely cried "Arara! Dry crackers!"
Its world had gone. Its other had gone.
It was a slave now, waiting to be sold
in the market square.

And the young Greeks kept on watching cocks and cunts
and squirting into pocket handkerchiefs.
And I kept on drinking ouzo and eating hors d'oeuvres.
And one wet afternoon in February,
with the wind blowing from Russia, you, José
- who'd drunk with me in a hundred small tavernas
and sailed with me to islands with magic names:
Mykonos, Naxos, Thira -
visited me. Your shoes were sodden sponges:
your face had lost its mestizo brown, paled to yellow.
You'd been laid off from your boatbuilding job and you knew now
you'd never get a ship here. You were going
to Barcelona. We drunk hot sage tea
and planned to meet again in - who knows where?
And I got you a ticket for an evening bus
to Marseilles, and you left that city.

The red-and-blue macaw
lingered and lunged from its horizontal bar
- but never shrieked "Dry crackers!" -
through that particularly raw and dreary winter
till spring came, and the plane and the mulberry trees
sprouted small leaves,
and the market fruits were no longer tangerines
and apples from Mount Pelion, but young figs.
Tart heart-shaped strawberries. Black sea cherries.
And one day when I passed by the pet shop
on my way to pursue the latest urgent researches
in my favourite theatre of investigation, I happened to notice
that the red-and-blue macaw no longer swung from
its horizontal bar. It had died, the owner told me,
of some tropical disease or other no veterinarian
could diagnose. Psittacosis, no doubt.

I too left that city shortly after. You, José,
are (I guess) on some ship or (I hope) back home
in San Pedro Sula, tending bar,

The Two Macaws (Cont.)

downing your **quaro** and curing hangovers
with tamarind juice. But sometimes when I drink
and remember that city, Piraeus, Ommonia, I think
of the two macaws, José. ¿Vos comprendés? My last word
on the matter is to repeat Ford Madox Ford: "This is the saddest story I
have ever heard."

-Blue-and-gold, red-and-blue tropical bird!

(Note: José was an unemployed Honduran sailor from San Pedro Sula, the second city of that country, whom I met in the sailor bars of Piraeus while I lived in Athens, and who became my close friend. **Arara** is the Brazilian Portuguese name for the macaw, **guacamaya** the Latin-American name in Spanish. **Guaro** is sugarcane brandy, that is, cheap rotgut white rum, in Central America. The form of Spanish employed, using "vos" instead of "tú" and accenting the last syllable of the verb, is current in most of Spanish America except Mexico. The quotation from Ford Madox Ford, which I have used elsewhere, is the opening line of **The Good Soldier**).

Athens in Winter

(Note: This poem, like all other poems about Athens and Greece included herein, was written, in large part, after I left Greece for India In 1983. The first fifteen lines were written, in a rather different version, while I was still in Athens, and I sent them to a friend, labelling them as a "fragment." He suggested I complete the poem, adding "though I suspect it will always remain a fragment." And I suspect he was right. It is linked closely, almost obsessively, with the poem preceding it and that following it in this selection and with others like "Hotel Leto", indeed with all the other poems on Athens - the same themes, references and even language and rightly so. The repetitions indicate what struck me, repelled me and attracted me about the city, people and culture, and the poems are indeed fragments - as in a sense all poems are - of the long poem about the city that I could never write.)

The spermy smell of the ailanthus tree
("the tree of heaven" - then heaven too's seed and blood?)
is memory now, now mulberries drip brief gold
along the avenue, and Seville oranges
burn in their dark green nests, bright poisoned eggs,
a season through, uneaten even by crows.
The monument no Athenian regards
stands pure above the polluted city still
on its sharp, escarped, cactus-soldiered hill
where Pericles preached, and Paul; Athena guards
her people yet and watches as they go
- Byzantine Turco-Arabs - far below,
just as they used to in the ágora
when they were Greeks. The caryatids dissolve;
their features blur in time and acid rain
that rakes the barren, thyme-encumbered hills
holding this cup of life. Down in Piraeus
the dark-skinned sailors sleep in parks and ruins,
dreaming of Africa and the Caribbean, ships
that never dock; brawl, drink and think of time
in their bistros. Around Ommonia Square
in dense, dark movie-houses sit the rows
of black-suited Mediterranean men,
heirs of Apollo and of Dionysos,
watching American fuck-movies, stealthily moving
hands slowly, rhythmically, to and fro in pockets,
under books and newspapers, pumping into Kleenex
the hot, sweet seed of life, while on the screen
shadow bodies, shadow organs explode, implode
over and over. **Malaka**. What to these
are the monk Abélard, and Heloïse?
Outside, a phantom of forgotten Turkey,
brown leaf blown in winter's winds, sells **saleep**

Athens in Winter (Cont.)

from a huge bronze samovar that glows at twilight.
In the morning old men hawk sesame rings
and spinach pies. Fat drones in a café
spoon honey and yoghurt, watch the passing crowd.
Cats prowl round tourists sitting at their tables
under vine and oleander, where the Acropolis
looks, propped-up intergalactic landing-pad.
In Constitution Square's pale Nordic sun
- opposite a palace now without a king -
the languid playboys, the newspaper-readers
and the rare tourist sip, beneath leafless poplars.
In a small café old men talk politics,
drink coffee, eat **kadaifi**, topped with cream.
Male whores, indigent soldiers line the stairs
of the subway entrance, where comfortable, ugly
peasant boots are sold, with transistors,
computers, soft-porn video. Umm Khoultoum
wails into impure air reeking of garlic.
And the slow snow falls. The strange slow Grecian snow,
transforms people to statues, statues to people.
The sixteen pillars of Olympian Zeus
are sixteen frozen fragments in time's storm.
They have pollarded the trees too early, depriving me of
contemplation of dying golden leaves.
Canadianism. No matter. Best got over
as all things must be got over in a city
with a tavern with a fig tree, which is all cities,
and is a figment. Hadrian
(mourning always over the unforgettable
Bithynian boy, now rotting in the reeds
of the sly Nile, swollen with bloated donkeys
steaming downstream), Hadrian loved this city,
gave it a library, a street, a gate.
Hadrian. Adrián. **Marinero Chileno**
who loved me briefly and then left. **Endaxi**.
They knew what I loved in them: their fearlessness,
their formlessness, their youth, the attitude
of warring with the world yet forgiving it,
an attitude no statue ever captures.
Something remains. Remake it. Walk these streets, these stone hills,
Mountain of Wolves, Philopappus' cenotaph,
Herod's theatre, the Tower of the Winds,
remember Themistocles, the Persian hordes,
Xerxes, weeping over his army, Darius
- Dario, Brazilian boy, Rubén Dario -
remember **juventud, divino tesoro**.
I drown in time, not drink, recovering, find

Athens in Winter (Cont.)

statues eyeless under immortal stone eyelids
and the crumbling faces of the caryatids.

(Note: The caryatids have of course since been removed from the Acropolis and stored in the nearby museum, because of the damage being done to them by acid rain and pollution in general, and replicas stand in their place. **Malaka**, "masturbator", is a common Greek expletive. **Saleep**, a thick, sweet white drink, served hot, made from the root of a plant, is a popular winter-evening refreshment in the Near East. **Kadaifi** is one of the very sweet many-layered, honey-filled Arab pastries also popular all over the Near East. Umm Khoultoum was a female Egyptian torch singer immensely popular and beloved in all the Arab/Islamic World. **Endaxi** means "O.K., so be it" in Greek. "Juventud, divino tesoro" is the opening line of the refrain of the great Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío's best known poem, "Canción de Otoño en Primavera.")

Last Days

There will be time.

Time for a last indifferent look at the Parthenon's
white undying letters printed against blue nothing
as you sit in that small café where the old men come
to read newspapers, drink their cognac and dream.

Time for a last subway trip down to Piraeus,
descending through dim suburbs, sea-smell, ships
leaving for islands, and the sailor bars
hot with your rash, drunk, always impecunious friends.

Goodbye, Honduras, Cabo Verde, Chile,
may your ships come in someday. **My** ship has come.

Time for a last visit to the porno movies
around Ommonia Square, to watch your men
jack off under their newspaper. Time to climb
the Hill of Wolves, say a prayer to St. George,
Aghios Yórgos, Ogúm, defender against dragons,
to St. Nicholas, patron of sailors and children,
to St. Nektários, protector of the poor.

Time for a last souvláki, a last tzadzíki
(whiplash of garlic, sour-smooth tang of yoghurt)
under the falling gold leaves of a fig tree.

There will be time for all that.

For retsina and tripe soup at three a.m.
in the market bar, as the panting, beefy men
- part Slav, part Turk, part Arab - and part Greek? -
bring in the slimy squid, bleeding slabs of lamb,
delicate-skinned, glowing tangerines from Argos.

Time for sunset at the temple of the sea-god
on the cliff above that blue, below that blue
fatality. For watching Párnitha
go from black to mauve to rose. For tramping Hyméttos
and the hills of Aegina, trampling the odorous
sage (**you** were never sage), drinking sage tea.

Nisi tsai. Tea of the islands. **Fascomiló.**

(These few words, a few customs will remain.

The rest you will cast off, as travellers leave
books and discarded clothing in hotels.)

For Paleochoúra's frescoed, abandoned chapels,
for the hotel near Váthis Square, where you bedded
how many young adventurers? - and yes, that mirror
in which you, godlike, watched each other's coupling.
There will be time for all that.

There will not be time

to find José, who has receded into
scurrying homunculus in alleys of Barcelona,
in **comajones** of San Pedro Sula,

Last Days (Cont.)

to find Iánnis, returned to his Morean
cocoon, to find Adrián, transmuted into
Venetian-glass figure, growing smaller, finer....
To learn the language, settle here, live a life here,
stop the endless wandering, still the leafstorm of days,
find friends, find routine, find what you will not find
- to give a name to time, to name a time
and say "This is my place. I will stop here.

I will have children, I will be buried here.
I will take a woman, to quench the dreadful thirst
- a dark, drab woman, beautiful to me only" -
to find out who you are, who the others are
- there will not be time. And it is growing late.

(Note: The Hill of Wolves is Mt. Lycabettos, in central Athens. St. George, the patron of Greece, is syncretised in the Brazilian-African macumba, or voodoo, religion, with the powerful Ogúm, god of war. The original St. Nicholas, a Fourth-Century Christian bishop in the now Turkish town of Myra, was the protector of sailors and children. Párnitha and Hyméttos are two of the three mountains guarding Athens on the landward side. Aegina is the nearest of the Greek islands to Athens: Paleochóra is an abandoned city of Orthodox churches and chapels there. **Nisi Tsai** [island tea] and **foscomiló** are Greek names for sage tea, often drunk in winter in Greece. **Comajón** is a Honduran word for "brothel." I said goodbye to the sailor named Adrián on the glass-making island of Murano, near Venice.)

Funerary Stela

He is going on a long journey.

The attitude's
grave and serene. The himation
is draped around his body in the precise, correct
manner. He is taking nothing with him.
Best to travel light.

The other, prostrate, humble, barely lifts
grief-stricken eyes, barely stretches his hand
to the hand extended.

They are both young.
Almost of an age, though clearly the traveller
is the elder by two or three years.
His gesture's more commanding, his raiment
richer.

Still, they are almost equals. **Something** one senses
passing between the two. Some current perceptible
even in this stone carving. You will notice their features
are similar, as men's grow with long accustomment.
As men's grow with love.
Did these two love? Did they swear sacred vows
of eternal loyalty toward each other? Surely the decencies
of caste and race and rank would preclude **that!**

He bids forever farewell to his young slave.

(Note: This poem is based, very loosely, on one of the most moving stelæ preserved in the National Museum of Athens. There are usually three figures on a funerary stela: the dead person, standing bidding farewell to a wife or loved one, who is generally seated, and Hermes, the conductor of the dead to Hades. In this case, a young man is bidding farewell to a younger one, who may have been a younger brother, but whom I, for the purposes of this poem, decided to make his slave, though, given Greek customs, that is rather unlikely. The names Artemidóros is invented, but, with its invocation of Artemis, the virgin goddess, is intended to suggest the purity of the love between the two. The boatman is of course Charon.)

The Mystery

I never understood it.
And now I do not want to.
Let the mist veil the mountain.

Epitaph for a Friend

He lost his peace of mind and spent his life
in an attempt to prove it really mattered
what cock went into what hole.

Vanitas

Has it then been
all for this?

Rare moments of peace
in old cafés, in afternoons
when sun
filters through windows.

Chair by potbellied stove
wine-glass, gloves laid beside.

Newspaper or book spreading
white, unregarded pages.

Watching the smoke-rings rise
diffuse in amber air

watching black tomcat lick
last night's wounds under table

watching lithe young men pass
- wine cheeks and eyes like stars -

gazing at the mountain
and the shadow of the mountain.

Knowing the plane tree's buds
will cast emerald shade someday

knowing the mulberry
will return with its sweetness

half-remembering a time
when sap swelled every vein

- diffuse images of boys
now dust and memory -

hearing the old, old chant
- base music of mankind -

"ten, twenty, fifty, hundred"
drachmae, rupees, dinars,
dollars

hearing the ancient lie
"I love you and you alone."

Has it all then been
only for this ?

The Exile

He was an old, old man: thirty-five years
a peasant, thirty-five more in a refugee camp,
always waiting, waiting to return to Jaffa,
to the small farm he'd left that far-off day.
The donkeys in the field. The chickens squawking
in the dirt of the yard. The bolted door.
The broken windows. Soldiers' shouts. The flight.
He twisted a dirty black-and-white **keffiyeh**
tighter around his neck against the wind.
It was getting colder already, and only October.
This might be his last winter. His hut leaked
and he had a chronic cough. With a wheezing sigh
he drained the dregs of his tea in the improvised, shabby
café and looked out a dust-speckled window
at the mud street, the hovels and tents of the camp
he did not call home (where his wife had died,
and his sons and grandsons had grown up and gone
away to fight and die also). But his gaze
was somewhere else. He didn't see them. I followed it
and I looked into the mind of his eye and saw
an olive grove.
A vineyard.
A tangerine tree.

Izmir or Stasis

Sit
still as a stone
still as a sleeping snake
watching the crowd of brown barbarians
cavorting on this sunsmitten
alien beach
living their moment in time
and keep
these images
for peace.

Plátanos'
dappled shade
scabrous mottled trunk;
grape arbour; smell of ripe figs.

Black dog
red tongue lolling
the only movement in the empty square.

Some olives on a plate
green ones, fat wrinkled black ones;
a slice of boiled pink squid.

Black-gowned, black-hatted
white-bearded
priest, arm raised in blessing.

Pantokrátor
looms from the ceiling;
a quiet candle glows before
the Panaghía.

Glass of clear
viscous liquid
and a small demi-tasse
of turbid coffee
on a wood table.

Men drift in
after the **litourgía**
talk of the crops, the weather
the coming war.

A few kilometers away
broken statues smile eyeless
in the sunlight;
their godlike limbs are shattered

Izmir or Stasis (Cont.)

in a stony place.

Does Pantokrátor
suddenly beckon
does the flame flicker before the silver ikon
of Panaghía on her shelf ?

A city aflame;
men, women, children skewered in the streets;
the smell of burning flesh;
the scent of hot, ripe figs.

Refugees clamber aboard departing boats
drop into water
like discarded fish;
bloated bodies float iridescent in the harbour.

Armies
of barbarians press around me;
they are talking strange tongues
eating strange foods
- they have nailed the Patriarch to his church door!

Peace, heart, be still.
It is all over now.
They have all gone away
into graceless suburbs of Athens, to Néa Smýrni.

Nothing remains.
Only a few words: "**tirópitta**," "**nisi tsai**"
- the herb tea drunk in winter for the cold -
figs and grape arbours
- and broken statues.

And I think that if I could learn to become a statue
then perhaps I could learn to understand the world.

(Note: This poem refers to events in the Greek-Turkish war of 1921-23 in Smyrna, or Izmir, the chief port and city of the Greek-inhabited area of Asia Minor, now Western Turkey. The descriptions probably owe something to Hemingway's masterly brief vignettes of incidents of this war. The reference to the Patriarch's [or Exarch's, actually, I believe] crucifixion comes from Patrick White's autobiography, **Flaws in the Glass**. Néa Smýrni is a suburb of Athens, originally inhabited by refugees from the above-mentioned war. The Pantokrátor is Jesus, though generally painted with rather stern features and sometimes considered to be God the Father. The Panaghía is the Virgin Mary. The **litourgía** is the Orthodox mass.)

Orchha

The purple sky, too hot for blue.
Grotesque grey towers, dizzying, unscaled.
Leprous kings' mausolea by a river.
The emblems of the force that failed.

Desire. Dust. Stillness. In a palace
where tiles tell the dead hearts of Jehangir
a cloud of ghosts shrills from cold, fetid chambers
for the living wanderer to hear.

(Note: Orchha is an almost abandoned city of deserted, bat-filled palaces, Hindu temples and crumbling mausolea in the north of the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. Jehangir [1605-1627] was a Moghul emperor.)

Hotel Leto

Odós
Missaraliótou
déka pénde.

Whisper the syllables:
mi - ssa - ra - lio - tou
but - whisper discreetly!

Whisper them only
to furtive lovers
and to me.

The tap-tap
of my typewriter
decodes their meaning.

Below Plaka
beneath the Acropolis'
wedding-cake of bones
on its cactus-guarded
cave-pocked hill
(within those caves
ikons, time-smoked murals:
Socrates' prison
was somewhere there)

behind street row
of bitter-orange trees
glossy-leafed

(their lantern fruit
- Christmas decoration -
uneaten still
even by birds

all winter long
until consumed by
mould's mimic frost)

behind the respectable
blue facade
the winked-out sign

strange murmurs, encounters
in blue hallways
in blue rooms

couples entering

couples leaving
crossing in corridors

with lowered eyes
comings and goings
exits and entrances

groans and whispers
cric-crac of bedsprings.

Only the tattoo
of my typewriter
counterpoints their rhythm

I am the only
permanent resident
of Missaraliótou
déka pénde.

(or was the address really
deka héki?
I and the taxi-drivers
could never decide.)

Only I discovered
the blue, taciturn
Hotel Leto.

Only I passed
those secret portals.

For these years
coming and going
to burning North Africa
the Middle East

I made it my base
I always returned
to those blue hallways
whispering rooms

(murmuring heart
of the human secret)

returned to tap
after midnight, and listen:
poems, translations

Hotel Leto (Cont.)

Groans and sighs.

Come with me
To the Hotel Leto.

Listen: sobs
Of pain, or pleasure

Small cries, brief grunts
Of ecstasy.

(The drumbeat
of my typewriter
decodes the language
of their dream.)

Listen: plop
Of a rotting orange
Squished underfoot
By late passersby.

(Quiet, past midnight
frosty in winter
beneath bright
Mediterranean stars.)

Listen: the tic-toc
of typewriter.

Listen: the distant
flushing of bidets.

Never the vulgar
bruit of a quarrel:
we were too well-bred!

Dino peering up
from his cellar
bar where no one
ever went.

Kyria Amalia
at the Reception
dressed in widow's black
discreet, austere.

Kyrios Andrewas
balding, distinguished

a priest, you'd say
or a confidence man.

The mad Egyptian maid
cleaning rooms
swearing in Arabic
at no one.

Out in the street
(in the middle of the street)
one phallic pillar
marmoreally stating

that a temple
(a minor temple)
once stood there
to an unknown God

on the very site
of the Hotel Leto.

Children, abortions
poems, translations
were engendered there
with equal joy

there the half-goddess
- unassisted -
gave birth to the god
under the umbrage
of an orange tree.

Missanaliótou
déka pénde

(known to taxi-men
murmured by businessmen)
whisper it only
to secret lovers

and to me:
me and my typewriter.

Hotel Leto (Cont.)

(Note: Leto, a Titaness, gave birth alone in the sacred island of Delos to Apollo and Artemis - fathered by Zeus. She leaned for support against a palm tree, a supposed descendent of which is the only tree at present growing on that now barren island, which, at the birth of Apollo, supposedly "shivered into flowers." Dékapénde = 15, déka héxi = 16.)

Mountains, Paddy Field and Monk: Composition

These mountains, piled behind mountains, blue with rain,
are merely mountains.
These paddy fields, rising in rich green terraces,
raise rice and corn for peasants.
This orange-red monk, standing under his dripping bo-tree,
is a man sheltering from the storm.

They are not amethysts, emeralds and rubies.
Cease the endless search for similitudes, for novelty.
Analogies are fallacies.
When it's not a stroke of lightning, metaphor is
the death of poetry. Accept beauty as beauty.

On Acrophobia

The towering white-trunked jungle trees, their tops
festooned with honeycombs
like golden pots,
called **kanethi** - bee trees - by the Karen.

Honey-ladders snake up skeletal trunks
to the honey-pot
the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

The young man climbs
reaches his pot of gold,
or slips and falls
forever into the pit.
Honey-hunting. It sounded so simple.

Toddy-tappers.
Traditional profession,
handed down from father to son over generations.
Members of one of the baser subcastes,
barely above the untouchables.
Collectors of the sugared sap
of coconut palm, date palm, palmyra
- later fermented into the milky beer
of the lower classes.

Toddy-tappers. It sounded so comical,
yet these rude village men
all day clamber up trunks
of their hundreds of palm trees,
drive the nail in near the crown, hang the gourd there,
and slither down,
return the next day, climb again, collect the pale juice
and slither down once more.
The same process, from West Africa to Indonesia.
Toddy. Tuak. Tuba. Palm wine.

There's not a young boy worth his salt in Goa
who can't sprint up to the top of the coconut palm
at the drop of a hat,
cut off a head of coconuts with his cutlass
and, simian, descend.

Sometimes, of course, they fall,
and that is life.

Then there are the conquerors of unnamed mountains
- which already knew their own name;

On Acrophobia (Cont.)

intrepid weekend rock climbers;
teenagers of Papua New Guinea who spiral down
from tenebrous, leafy jungle treetop platforms,
lianas tied to their feet,
in elaborate initiation rites;
the swirling pole dancers of Papantla;
the men who clean office windows in skyscrapers;
the nameless construction workers who build condominiums,
the engineer on his aery scaffolding.
These were the things in life that frightened me.
It always gave me shudders
when Jiggs escaped to one of those scaffoldings
from Maggie's wrath.
As did those movies in which villains pursued heroes
through the entrails of tall buildings,
with people dangling from window ledges and parapets;
the fall from the bridge in **Saturday Night Fever**.

I suppose it all began with childhood training,
or maybe it's hereditary, congenital;
there are boys who like to shinny up trees;
there are boys who are afraid to.

I could climb Mayan pyramids, but not come down;
whenever, on the ramparts of some crusader castle,
I looked over, everything would begin to swirl.
I never went **anywhere** near the Grand Canyon.
I never visited the Empire State Building.

Now, lying here in the darkness of the jungle
and night, in an imaginary republic, I think
of honey-hunters and toddy-tappers. I reflect
on the strange ways of man,
on the innumerable manners of living and dying,
on the unspeakable courage of the human being,
on acrophobia, claustrophobia, agoraphobia...
I guess, compared with many, I'd be considered versatile:
still I reflect on all that I can't do
can never be.

(Note: The "imaginary republic" is the state of Kathulé - "black flower" - which, though unrecognised by any country, has been set up in Southeastern Burma by the Karen, a Sino-Tibetan minority group [one of at least a dozen such tribal groups fighting the almost nonexistent authority of the central Burmese government] which makes up some 12% of the population of that country and which has been conducting a civil war with the government for the past thirty-nine years. The pole dancers of Papantla, in Vera Cruz, Mexico, known as "Los Voladores", "the Flyers", are Totonacs, related to the Mayans, and still perform their pre-Columbian fertility rites.)

After Krishnamurti

Only the silence of a stilled mind;
only the stillness of a quiet heart;
quietness no philosophy or art
can teach; calm that you do not seek, but find,

above all, not in words, for words are wind,
the castle self, mind, memory build, defence
against the ineffable moment when silence
implodes, and the outer emptiness is twinned

with the emptiness inside; you see at last
what is, what you are - linked fragments of a dream
of time and change; the sparkle of a stream
in eternal movement: no future, no past,

only present; the drop of dew that clings
in a sunlit morning, to a green bird's wing.

On Awakening in Agra and Remembering Henry King's "Exequy"

So one has somehow
survived into another morning.

The eyes
open and perceive.
The hand
trembles and executes.
The infallible heartbeat
comes.
Drums.

Sun gilds the cage.

There is a room with green walls
and a blue ceiling of carved stone, repeating
motifs from Khajuraho.

Cigarettes on the bedtable. A soft boy brings
milky chai.

- "They called her 'The Jewel of the Palace.'
His tomb for her became his living tomb." -

Well, I must rearrange myself, thank someone somewhere,
pay a bill, and go about my business.

What **is** that business ? This business of living and dying,
I guess. I never knew. No one ever asked.

But I am recalling

immortal distant words of an Anglican bishop
from the seventeenth century, mourning his young wife:

"Wait for me there.
I shall not fail
to meet thee in that hollow vale."

(Note: "The Jewel of the Palace" is a translation of the name of Mumtaz Mahal, the favorite wife of the Moghul emperor Shah Jehan [1627-1658], who built for her, after her premature death, the mausoleum which has become known as the Taj Mahal, a corrupted form of her name. Shah Jehan was later dethroned by his son and imprisoned in a room of his palace from which he could gaze out at all hours on the Taj Mahal, where he also was buried, when he died.)

Children Waving at Trains

One of those universals of human culture.

Infallibly, a train leaves a station
somewhere, sometime, that station with its vendors
of **chai** and cakes, its kiosk, its homeless beggars,
a station-master, watch- and whistle-proud,
white-and-black board announcing name and altitude,
and an old clock, still keeping Roman time.
And as the tired train's swaying dark-red coaches
with their dusty windows and burden of human baggage
- turbans, veils, shawls, saris and business suits -
trundles across grey fields or hyacinth mountains
or the yellow scrub of desert, infallibly,
from every shack and village along the route
the beautiful children, waving.

They are of every race, language and colour.
They wave from instinct, yet with a sure knowledge.
No one has coached them on how to greet strangers;
no one has ever taught them; yet they know
someone is always leaving on some journey
from some station; they sense the tie that links them:
the travellers are travelling into distance;
the children are travelling into time.

Hello, hello, the children are calling.
Goodbye, goodbye, the travellers are musing
as they vanish with their load of hopes and baggage
into the distance swallowing them like a tunnel,
the narrowing funnel of time. But for the children
the world's rose opens its petals each day a little wider

- they are waving to their future.

The Cloud of Unknowing

There was a time when I was young
and utterly alone;
I knew no one; I loved no one;
I was a rolling stone.

And yet I talked to trees and clouds
and they spoke back to me;
my uniqueness seemed to unlock
their gates of mystery.

Then came the years of boys and wine,
far countries, alien seas;
pressed in the human throng, I had
no time for clouds and trees.

All these have passed, and I am left
again with cloud and tree
as companions; but they speak
no language known to me.

Bhopal

Suddenly thrust to late-news prominence,
a ghastly glory; then obscurity
cloaking you slowly again in a kind of cloud,
a haze of time; who will remember the capital
of the state of Madhya Pradesh? The middle people?

Old Muslim town: narrow alleys, Moghul buildings,
turret and tile and arch, bazaar and market,
the country's largest mosque, ruddy minarets
dotted with pigeon-holes, cool marble certitudes
divided into a chessboard of black and white

praying-squares. Hundreds of young boys with white skullcaps
squatting, cross-legged pawns, chanting the book,
greeting my passage, under suspicious eyes
of frowning, bearded elders, robed in white.

Two artificial lakes, that favourite pastime
of maharajahs and sultans in these dry lands:
the upper one wide, blue and shallow, bordered by raintrees;
the lower one set in a landscaped, deep
ravine, with its gardens where families
sat in the suffocating night, took their simple pleasures,
and lovers strolled among flame-of-the-forest
and magwa trees that shook clouds of fiery blossoms
on rich and poor alike. It should not have happened
to you, and I momentarily walked among you.

A little cloud, no bigger than a man's hand.

I visited the two-thousand-year-old ruins
of the Sanchi stupas, went to Mandu's, Raisen's
mediaeval fortresses, went to Khajuraho,
where I contemplated countless sculptures of mystics

making it with two women at once, or of two men
servicing one woman - conga lines of sex.
A man exuberantly copulates from behind

with his horse; his engorged friend awaits his turn;
while the startled female witness claps exquisitely moulded
hands over eyes - all proving precisely - what?
I'll never know. For my vision is clouded.

Ox and ass fell too. Leaving the dead behind,
they stumbled in their thousands through those streets,
blinded and weeping, gasping for the air

Bhopal (Cont.)

that suddenly was now no longer air
but methyl isocyanate. Charming name.

The heat. Scent of frangipani, flowering mango
in the close evening air, when sole relief
was to stroll between the lakes. The boy who shouted
"I fuck you?" to me in the night bazaar
while his friends all laughed and showed those phosphorescent
Indian teeth in their dark hopeless faces.

A ghost, a cloud was hovering among us, boys.
We should have made it while there still was time.
I should have taken up your offer. After all,
life is a fragile gift. And no man knows.

Low beerhalls on the street by the train station
- that street where the night cloud enveloped many
in its invisible mantle. A small hotel
staffed by courteous, turbaned Sikhs - **that** too was something
waiting for us in time. We could not know.

It was only March. Month of the Annunciation.
Had it all been announced, would any have believed?
The hundreds who slept on the railway-station platform
each night of their lives - I guessed it mattered little

to them in the end. Just as little as it matters
that a man fucked a horse in Khajuraho
one thousand years ago, and that some sculptor
chose to congeal that moment or that memory

in stone, for personal or religious reasons.
We see through a glass darkly, through a cloud
into past, present, future. And a cloud
- silent and invisible and scentless -
shadows our days on earth. Not only Bhopal's.

There is no past, no future. Only present.
The timeless present. Shiva Nataraja
- the lingam, the life force, the sacred phallus -
creator and destroyer, dances the dance
that makes, sustains, unmakes the universe,
each of its dancing atoms. Vishnu, sleeper
and preserver, on his snake-bed, dreams a dream
of the world that we are; when he awakens
our world will vanish like a cloud, a silent

Bhopal (Cont.)

scentless, invisible cloud, or, should you prefer
Christian symbolism, a pillar of cloud by day
a fire by night.

Like a thief in the night
it came to Bhopal.

(Note: I am fully aware that methyl isocyanate is neither scentless nor invisible, but for the purposes of this poem it shall be. Shiva Nataraja is Shiva represented as dancing the cosmic dance.)

Prepositions

Into the space
of a knot of the wall
into the distended
hole of the she-ass
into the red
heart of the watermelon:
the sex instinct
is perfectly neutral.

Within the wonderful
hollow of hand
within the magic
chamber of woman
within the fetid
cloaca of man:
the sex instinct
is perfectly neutral.

Upon the sleeping
face of the son
upon tortured, dying
old women's bodies
upon the still warm
corpses of children:
the sex instinct
is perfectly neutral.

Dunia

The small brown waiter (he's maybe twelve years old;
descendant of headhunters, cannibals:
now Jesus and Mary simper and the Sacred Heart drips
from every wall)
is amazed - amused ? - by my request for coffee and banana brandy
at seven a.m. Time to catch the early boat
forever away from his island.
He serves table, washes glasses,
bustles about the dockside café,
thumbs through my dictionary, bums a clove cigarette,
discovering.
Outside, black mountains glower,
shimmer into gold-green jungle
as the sun rises
on a cold, blue, depthless lake, crater of a dead volcano.
Hairy red rambutans, vegetable tarantulas,
purple mangosteens with delicate white souls,
sulphurous spiked durians, lie on the dock beside
mounds of tiny dead lakefish, that darted silver.
And the small boy (too young, too young for love
and all its attendant ecstasies and pratfalls)
asks about my distant country, then enquires
how one says "world." In Bahasa Indonesia
"dunia."
The adult world of work, sex, children and death.
The too-muchness of its too-littleness.
The lost vision.
A tired mongrel nurses three hungry pups
in the blue arcade across the way; pink piglet
nuzzles a fat black sow; and I reflect
on being young - "the glory and the dream" -
the perfect muchness, the unending richness
- rediscovering the universe.

(Note: the lake is Lake Toba, the world's largest crater lake, in Northern Sumatra. In the middle of the lake is a new crater, the large island of Samosir, inhabited by one of the many divisions of the Batak people, proto-Malays probably originally from Northern Burma or Tibet-Mongolia, who have inhabited the mountainous interior of Sumatra for several thousand years. Formerly fierce warriors who practised cannibalism and headhunting, they were discovered by missionaries only in the mid-19th century and conquered by the Dutch only in 1905: they are now fervent Christians. The fruits mentioned are all tropical ones of Southeast Asia. Clove cigarettes [30% clove, 70% tobacco], originally concocted as an asthma remedy, now smoked everywhere in the country, are to me the smell [every country has its national odour] and the quintessence of Indonesia.)

Bukittinggi

The young men in this highland town,
as in all Muslim lands, go intertwined
like two halves of a whole, hand upon shoulder,
arm in arm, arm around waist, romping home from school,
loafing on street-corners, ogling girls
distant and unapproachable as stars,
unknown as exotic hothouse flowers
behind their veils and wimples, so the unfulfilled young men
hold hands and wait.

There volcanoes stand guard over this mountain city.
The volcanoes are conical and green,
shaped like swelling young girls' breasts,
jagged and notched at the top, like rotting teeth,
and are not quite extinct; sometimes they rumble
or flash fire in the night, and the air fills with the
unmentionable odour of sulphur,
borne on the same wind wafting the fragrance
of the frangipani, the night-blooming jasmine that opens
its starlike blossoms, and the lovesick young men
hold hands and wait.

I never knew that warm, tropical friendship
- as innocent and palpable as fruit -
in my cold country; there was never a hand
in mine, an arm on my shoulder. And it is too late now.
I go into my night. Sometimes, a contact:
a boy, a room, a bed; lust flashes open its eyes,
and the air fills with the malevolence of sulphur
and jasmine. Then the scent dies away.
There'll be no arm upon my shoulder now.
No hand in mine, I am a dead volcano.
The young men call me "bapak" when they see me.

(Note: Bukittinggi ["High Mountain"] is a small city in Central Sumatra, just below the equator, inhabited by the Minangkabau people, who are very strict and orthodox Muslims, though they are, oddly, a matriarchal society, with the grandmother as head of the clan, inheritance through the female line, the husband subordinate to his wife's family, with whom he lives, and education of children controlled by the women. "Bapak" means "father" and is the traditional term in Indonesia used to address older men.)

Flawed Archetypes

Now that these things are over
and the countdown has begun
I perceive all relationships
were really only one.
Under the glittering surface
variety of form
a single theme unfolded
the same pattern was spun.
The archetypes of absence:
lost father, searching son;
the teacher, fount of wisdom,
the pupils, yearning, come.

From some I sought protection;
I gave harbour to some;
from some I sucked experience;
some came to me to learn.
But we each tried, unknowing,
to play both rôles in one;
at the same time
teacher-father
and questing pupil-son.
The teachers were not teachers;
the pupils could not learn;
My fathers did not protect me;
I abandoned each son.

Outside Bangkok

Late night, the house asleep
in the tropical blackness, like some gentle beast,
under the palmyras.

Acres of swampland breathe mephitically
in the dark. Only the small frogs' twitter,
the gecko's chuckle, the plucked string of a bullfrog.

The two dogs curl, a black stone and a white one,
in the courtyard, guarding against
imaginary monsters.

Needing to piss, I tumble, dazed, half-drunk
from the upstairs bedroom
down a staircase of dreams,
a staircase of twenty years

and see you in the living-room, lying face down
on your mattress, your beautiful body
statuesque in sleep, the noble curve of the head
nestled on folded arm.

I approach, I touch, I run my fingers through
the dark jungle of your hair.

You stir drowsily, luxuriously, murmur
"Edward, I am asleep. What do you want?"

"Nothing," I mutter and head for the bathroom. But truly you have given
me more than I wanted, more than I ever asked for

- **you reminded me of Ali.**

(Note: Ali was my houseboy and lover in Trinidad, W.I., twenty years ago.)

Separatio

"No pain like this body"

After the act, the lover always sleeps
so soundly, it seems more than that, so deep;
the solaced bodies sever, sunder; night
awakens with its voices; and it's right,
seeing that we are men, and men are sheep
after their act, that lovers always sleep.

After their act, the lovers lie alone,
problems as yet unshared, burdens unknown;
on that strange meeting-ground which is the bed
they tried to interchange them, found instead
the shifting shadows of a neutral zone;
after the act, the lovers lie alone.

After the act, the lovers lie apart;
breast no more beats on breast, nor heart to heart.
A star-crossed desert lies between those two
who did all to cross it that man can do.
And can you tell me why - with all your art -
after their act, the lovers lie apart ?

(Note: Why the Latin title? I liked the sound of it. I don't know the origin of the poem's epigraph. It was the title of a short story I read many years ago and has remained with me since.)

FROM "LAND WITHOUT SORROW"

"I only am escaped alone to tell thee." **Job,1**

(Note: "Land without sorrow" is an epithet, one of the many formerly bestowed by travellers on the island today called Sri Lanka. These poems form part of the still uncompleted sequence of poems dealing with the civil war going on there - a sequence which, if ever finished, will consist of 15 or 16 poems: hence I have been unable to number the individual poems presented here, and have given them provisional titles instead. I was in Sri Lanka from mid-June to mid-August, 1983. The island was clearly in a troubled and uneasy state when I arrived: a state of emergency, suspending most constitutional guarantees, had been declared, parliament was practically paralysed, the aged president and the ludicrous and inefficient prime minister had lost control of the government to Sinhalese religious and racial fanatics, and constant incidents of carnage and arson were occurring in and around the east-coast port of Trincomalee, under constant curfew and barred to visitors from other countries. But real violence did not break out until July 24-25, Full Moon Day, a monthly Buddhist holiday in that country, and it broke out in the circumstances described in one of these poems. It quickly spread from the market area of Colombo to involve the whole island, but most especially the tea-growing hill towns, of mixed Tamil-Sinhalese population, in the mountainous central region of the island. I shall not try to give here either the historical background or the modern ramifications of the ancient enmity between Sinhalese and Tamils: anyone who reads the daily newspaper is informed of the facts, and the poems here themselves trace as much of the story as I considered necessary or usable. It is not my intention to take sides in the conflict, and if these poems seem to be somewhat pro-Tamil, that is accidental and perhaps unavoidable. In fact, I happen to have met mostly Sinhalese while in the island and made most of my personal contacts with them; I found them much more approachable and comprehensible, as well as more personable and charming, than the caste-ridden Tamils; I arrived with a certain prejudice already formed against Tamils, because I considered them "Indians" and I was coming directly from India, a country which I had already conceived a violent dislike of; and I loathe Hinduism even more than Buddhism. These attitudes of mine, nevertheless, can't change the facts: that not 400 or 500 people, as the government claims, but several thousand people, 95% of them Tamils, were killed in the two-week-long riots; that these riots were abetted and encouraged by the government, the army and the police [all Sinhalese] and represented a direct policy of genocide against the Tamils; and that Sinhalese and Buddhists make up no more than or at most 65% of the population of the island, in which Tamils constitute not 12% or 18% of the inhabitants [government figures often cited by newspapers and magazines], but probably at least 25%, when

FROM "LAND WITHOUT SORROW" (contd.)

one includes the million or more stateless Tamils [who hold no citizenship or passport, only a card allowing them to live in/travel to either India or Sri Lanka, and who, in violation of the 1955 agreement between the two countries, have been neither "repatriated" by India, though their ancestors went to Sri Lanka over 100 years ago, nor legalised as citizens by Sri Lanka], and over 30% if one includes the 8% of Tamil-speaking Muslims. [Christian "burghers", mostly of mixed Sinhalese-Portuguese & Sinhalese-Dutch descent, form some 6% of the total.] In other words, I saw what I saw, and I know what I know, and I must report it truly, regardless of my own sentiments. I was caught by the riots in a mostly Muslim, Tamil-speaking beach resort on the West Coast, Arugam Bay, and as my Sinhalese companion became alarmed for his safety and I for mine, we tried to make our way back to Colombo through central hill country. Buses were running, in the few hours when curfew was not in force, only from one town to the next, and it took me 10 days to reach Colombo, which by then was practically a ghost town under permanent curfew, get to the devastated port of Negombo and to the airport, which by then had become a sort of refugee camp, and take the first possible flight to India. As we travelled through the hill country, town after town burned down in monotonous succession - Badulla, Bandarawela, Haputale, Nuwara Eliya - each seemingly waiting until our arrival for the "troubles" to start. Food distribution and government control broke down completely, newspapers were not published, buses and trains did not run, and the only information on the state of matters came from wild rumours, other travellers and the BBC. [The local radio and TV broadcast only emergency government decrees and bulletins, and classical music.] Curfew began earlier every day - first at 6 p.m., then at 4, then at 2, then at 10 a.m., then 48-hour stretches at a time, and one could travel, of course, **if** one found transport, only in the non-curfew hours. I was accompanied on this trip by a 17-year-old Sinhalese peasant lad [who almost certainly saved my life by the mere fact of his being with me, since I have the unfortunate tendency to speak my mind on all occasions], who had hardly been away from his native village in central Sri Lanka, Ambulla, before, but who desperately wanted to be a "guide" [since he had run away from home and could find no other employment, and he spoke fair English] and who accordingly attached himself to me and could not be shaken off. [Besides, I enjoyed his company and came to be grateful indeed for it.] He had never had close contact with any foreigner before, he had never slept in a hotel or eaten in a good restaurant, he had had no sexual experience whatsoever - Sri Lanka is a rather puritanical place [but he was burning with desire for it]; he had never even drunk a beer in his life. During those strange two weeks, then, which seem to me now like a mixture of nightmare and fairy tale, and completely unreal, I watched a poor but formerly proud, civilised and peaceful, and still exquisitely beautiful, land slide into anarchy and

FROM "LAND WITHOUT SORROW" (contd.)

death, and I saw a boy, almost a child, suddenly blossom into manhood. Both spectacles were moving, and it is they that these poems are about. The sequence is incomplete, because the central poems of it are intended to be an attack, not merely on Buddhist practice and the role of the militant, worldly, very much politically, involved Sinhalese Buddhist Sangha [the monks] in both sins of omission [refusing to speak out against the violence or even try to do anything to stop it, even in a city like Kandy where there are hundreds of them and they practically control the life of the town] and sins of commission [inflaming the Sinhalese multitudes, instigating the riots and in some cases even leading them] but also on the philosophy of Buddhism itself, on what I consider to be its lack of a social doctrine, on its policy of numbness, death in life, quietism, passiveness, fatalistic acceptance, as a solution to the sorrow of existence: like the ostrich, stick your head in the sand; desire is sorrow, so eliminate desire, that is, eliminate the human factor. Take no pleasure in any of your senses, given you by God to enjoy, perceive and praise the world create by Him, but consider it all Maya and unworthy of your attention. But the longer I live in a Buddhist country where I find Buddhism **does** have a social doctrine and an important and beneficial social rôle, the more I realise any religion can be turned toward good or evil by its adherents, and the less able I am to complete these central poems. Buddhism alone can certainly not be blamed for the corrupt theocracy that Sri Lanka has become, any more than it can be blamed for the excesses, cruelties and abominations committed by the Buddhist god-kings of so many Asian nations, in their day - and they were all devout Buddhists. And no doubt the Lord Buddha, if reincarnated, would first fail to recognise and then disown the institutionalised religion, in all its perverted forms - Mahayana, Hinayana, Tantric, Zen - that he inadvertently founded. The loftiest philosophies, to paraphrase Leonard Woolly, cannot prevent their own distortion when institutionalised as religions. Human beings and their loftiness seem to make remarkably little difference in the day-to-day behaviour of mankind. This is perhaps why I tend today to favour small crank groups that actually **do** something to alleviate the miseries of human life - the Quakers, the Seventh Day Adventists, the Salvation Army, Mother Teresa's nuns, Alcoholics Anonymous, etc. - rather than philosophise about them.)

* (Buddhist and Hindu philosophy are the death of poetry and the antithesis of the poet's attitude of finding and glorifying God **through** His creations, not in spite of them.)

LAND WITHOUT SORROW (contd.)

Listen, Dear Reader

The southbound bus, heading straight for Colombo, careens down the highway, which is also the main and only street of the forlorn, straggling country town noted principally for its fifth-century caves, with their rather fine murals (shown, for a fee, by monks meditating there).

The bus stops. The tourist descends. The bus reels on. He is burdened with luggage. He looks dazedly about him for a coolie or a hotel signboard. Brown lizard boy lounging against that stone wall, half-hidden by hibiscus, detaches himself briskly from the foliage, approaches, proffers his aid. The middle-aged white man (who is rather crotchety and easily intimidated by touts and by strange towns) accepts, follows the boy into this story.

(Note: the town is Ambulla, in central Sri Lanka.)

LAND WITHOUT SORROW (contd.)

Cutting the stone

Because I loved you well,
young country boy,
I knew that you were not
a faggot's toy.

Tongue in the ear, the thrash
of aching loins;
the first coming - gush, gash
that cuts, and joins.

Brown body by my side,
warm, soft as silk,
giving for the first time
life's lustrous milk.

Now, far away from you,
your simple need,
I still taste in my mouth
the sweet wild seed.

(Note: "Cutting the stone" is a translation of the Sinhalese idiomatic expression for anal intercourse. I have further extended it here as a sort of metaphor for first sexual experience in general.)

LAND WITHOUT SORROW (contd.)

How He Left School

"I suppose that year I must have been fifteen
(spoken from the dizzy heights of seventeen years)
- that was the year I started to notice girls.
Anyhow, the monsoon had not been good.
The rice shrivelled in the paddies. The cassava
and lesser things we plant against hunger
dried up and died. My father was angry
and blamed it all on karma, and on me,
his ungrateful son. I'd like to know what I
have to do with **his** karma, but anyhow,
that was the year. I was in the sixth form
with the other village boys. When we came in June
to class, each of us had to have a notebook.

A copybook, they called it. I had none,
and no money. So I begged sheets of paper
from Sarath and Lalith, my friends.
But of course the teacher knew, and finally one day
she said 'Herath, you bring a copybook,
or leave this class!' I went home to my father,
asked him for money. Ask a stone for water!
He stormed and raved and ranted, cursed me down:
'Fifteen years old. Strong as a rail, and useless!'
This is the kind of son I begot, with all my labour,
on that worthless whore, your mother....' So I went to my
mother, and she said 'Listen, Herath, I always try to lay
something by. Now take this money, go buy your copybook,
and never say anything to your father about this.'
So that problem was solved.

Two months went by. My copybook
was full by now, and I was borrowing paper
from Sarath and Lalith once again.
And my teacher said again 'Herath, get a copybook
or get out.' I went back to my mother
and she said - it seemed to me, a little guiltily -
'Son, I have no more rupees saved this time.
Maybe your father's right, maybe it's better
you plough the land the way his people and mine
have always done. After all, you're the first child
that learned to read and write in all our family.
Enough study. Now go and help your father.'
My mother never shouted at me like my father.
I loved her. I considered her advice.
I agreed with her. Why should I learn **angrezi**

LAND WITHOUT SORROW (contd.)

How He Left School (contd.)

and arithmetic and geography and history?
I was just a country boy, a peasant's son.

So I didn't go back to school. I helped my father:
we worked the fields from dawn till the night came,
but the monsoon failed again that year...."

"Herath,
how much did a copybook cost in that year
when you left school?"

"Oh, one-and-a-half rupees."

- Ten cents. A dime. Or, if you will, a lifetime.

LAND WITHOUT SORROW (contd.)

Arugam Bay

Surf's up.

The surfers out there, curling along the crest
of their Platonic search for emptiness.

Afternoon, blue and gold, like those long-vanished ones
of Ipanema, Barra da Tijuca.

Salt wind and spray blew in, whetted appetite,
and the stuffed crab was truly exquisite.

The crowded bar, decorated with photos of surfers,
of blue-green swirling tubes. Everyone spoke **strine**.

Wattled and bamboo walls, a palm-thatched roof.
The perfect wind blowing. The perfect wave.

The perfect boy beside me. Acquiescent, opening
to life and pleasure. In the true sense, the **paidí**,

talking eagerly to strangers, quaffing beers
he'd learned to drink only the week before.

(At Polonnaruwa, he'd trembled when I took him
into his first bar; as luck and legend

would have it, an archetypal drunk staggered
out the swinging door and collapsed, as we two entered.)

We'd spent the morning in the nearby village:
unquiet, shifty Moorish bazaar.

I'd changed a traveller's cheque. Herath had gone looking
for a gold chain, and a pair of corduroy trousers.

The things a young boy needs! Well, I suppose
That's why we need young boys, like this one poised

on the wave's crest between boyhood and manhood. Surfer
on his perfect tube. The age of seventeen.

Something was wrong in the village. Something we'd sensed
in each carpet merchant's Anwar Sadat face.

The night before that had been full-moon night.

LAND WITHOUT SORROW (contd.)

Arugam Bay (contd.)

The two of us had walked for dusty miles
on a road that led to the shrine in Kataragama
(the triple shrine, with kovil, mosque and stupa,
the reconciliation of three peoples)
then celebrating with pierced flesh and flagellation,

fire-walking, lingam-worshipping, dangling from hooks,
the feast of Lord Murugam, god of war.

Truckloads of drunken Tamil boys zoomed past us
shouting words of friendship? Insult? We did not speak Tamil.

We'd walked along in that cold radiance,
in that warm air, and at one point veered off,

sat in a tangle of sea grape on a dune
by the dark, sparkling sea and stared at the moon,

distant and dead. And you'd breathed "Not Arugam Bay.
This place is paradise." I did not say

one word, for suddenly I was seventeen
and I was you again.... The barman, abrupt:

"Gentlemen, I'm sorry to interrupt,
but you have been listening to the radio?
The Tamil Tigers have murdered thirteen Sinhalese soldiers
near Jaffna. When the bodies were brought back
to Colombo, army men mutinied, ministers
refused to attend the funerals. Now they're burning
Colombo market down. The Pettah's gone. (**They?** Who were **they?**
We asked that many times in future days.)
Curfew has been declared across the island
from six p.m. sharp. So, gentlemen, if you'll pay...."

I should have known that a land without sorrow
would also be a land without tomorrow.

LAND WITHOUT SORROW (contd.)

Brief History

"History is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind." Edward Gibbon

Who

are they, then?

These people? The Sinhalese, the lion people?

Prince Vijaya came

about 500 B.C., give or take a few decades;

an emissary (some say son) of the Emperor Ashoka

arrived some two-and-a-half centuries later, converted them to Buddhism. But **who** were they?

Well, Prince Vijaya,

expelled from Bengal by the king his father

whom he'd, in classic fashion, tried to murder,

being only one out of a hundred sons

(all politicians, like him, all eager for the throne,

all of whom he'd also have been obliged to murder,

as was the custom in those lands, on accession),

expelled, as I say, from golden Bengal,

sailed, with his followers, south for countless days

until they encountered the great, green island

hanging from India's tip, from India's sorrows,

shaped like an emerald pendant. Or a teardrop.

Landed there, found it, alas, inhabited

by Tamils, demon Ravana's cursed spawn,

and tribals. Vijaya murdered the tribals,

murdered the Tamils. (Though some say the Tamils

were not yet there, notwithstanding the island

lies ten miles off their Indian coast. One could say to ignore

something as close as **that** would be a trifle

- well, short-sighted.) Anyway, Vijaya set up his kingdom

and ruled and prospered. His descendants built great cities

where they reigned in pomp, reared temples, palaces,

had innumerable enemies crushed to death

in stately pageantry, under the hooves

of sacred elephants (though they were Buddhists now.)

Sigiraya. Polonnaruwa. Beads

on history's rosary, told by an aged monk

with a short memory for human suffering.

A slip from the holy bo-tree at Bodhgaya

was brought (some say, by the Buddha himself

who climbed a mountain and set his footprint on it

- though others claim **that** was Adam. Or the Prophet).

It grew and itself become millenary

at Anuradhapura. Centuries passed.

LAND WITHOUT SORROW (contd.)

Brief History (contd.)

Slowly, imperceptibly, back the Tamils came from India - the idol-worshippers, black Mara's people - as they were bound to do, pushed the Sinhalese further and further south.

The Sinhalese

(who are really Bengalis) pushed the Tamils north again. Arab traders touched the island and called it Serendip, "the land of happy, accidental discoveries." Came the Portuguese, buying spices, selling crucifixes and guilt, who named the place Ceilão. They in turn were ousted by the Dutch, bluff no-nonsense merchants, these by the British - stiff and nostalgic for their own green island - who planted tea, imported even more Tamils to pick it, from India, finally left (having also planted - they thought - democracy and also - did they think? - black, burning hatred).

And Serendip-Ceylon became Sri Lanka.

Land of the Holy Lion. Though lions never have been seen there. **They** come from golden Bengal - now Bangladesh and Calcutta's teeming filth.

Flux and reflux of history. Human waves - the waves move on, each particle of them stays in its place, fixed in its prejudices, immovable, quite dispensable, unique - beating and breaking on

coasts, inundating, receding from a green island moulded like a teardrop.

Aryan and Dravidian, North and South (here bizarrely reversed): endless conflict.

Their union-separation, fusion-fission.

The hug and tug of war. High tide and ebb-tide.

The undertow, pulling the lonely swimmer to a lonely death at sea. Now we, privileged, witness these latest skirmishes in a civil war two-and-a-half millennia old. The wave moves on again. In what direction? That the particles cannot know. Only the tears are quantifiable.

LAND WITHOUT SORROW (contd.)

Brief History (contd.)

(Note: On "Arugam Bay": This east-coast beach is much visited by Australian surfers, the world's best and most mindless, or perhaps single-minded. Ipanema and Barra da Tijuca are beaches, also good for surfing, in or near Rio de Janeiro, where I once lived. Polonnaruwa is one of the ruined royal cities of past Sinhalese kingdoms. The "Moorish" village on the beach is called Pottuvil. The self-mutilation and other ghastly rites mentioned are practised at Hindu festivals held at the shrine of the three religions in Kataragama, in far southern Sri Lanka, and include piercing the body with as many needles, daggers, etc., in as many places as possible, especially cheeks and tongue, also hands, and suspending oneself by the mouth from huge hooks; these monstrous practices [which seemingly do no physical harm to those who indulge in them], are common in Tamil areas of southern India and areas to which Tamils have spread, like Sri Lanka and Malaysia, especially at feasts honouring Lord Shiva - under any of his many names - and his son, Lord Murugam or Kartikkaya, the god of war. The Tamil Tigers are a mythical group invented, I suspect, by Sinhalese hysteria completely: the name is loosely applied to any of the Tamil resistance groups struggling against Sinhalese oppression in Sri Lanka. The Pettah is the market district of downtown Colombo: it was almost completely burned down in the 1983 riots. **Paidí** - boy [Modern Greek].)

(Note: On "Brief History": this poem needs little explication: obviously, I don't buy the Sinhalese version of history which alleges that Prince Vijaya and his followers found a deserted island inhabited only by a few aboriginals, when they landed there; the Tamils had been established on the Indian coast nearby, from which Sri Lanka is easily visible, for at least a thousand years previously, and would certainly not have allowed such a fertile island to remain unoccupied. Ravana is the demon king of Lanka [which some suppose was Sri Lanka, though others consider it may have been an island off the coast of Gujarat State in Western India] who kidnapped Sita, the wife of Lord Rama, an avatar of Vishnu, and held her in his demonic isle, defended by his army of devils, thus setting off the long war described in the great North Indian epic called the **Ramayana**: it is my contention that Ravana and his hosts represent the dark-skinned Dravidians, esp. the Tamils, - at that time not yet Hindus - whom the lighter-skinned Aryans who brought Hinduism from the north had to contend with, and drove further and further south, over hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years, during their prehistoric invasion of India from the north. The Sinhalese are Aryans from Bengal, and their language is closely related to Bengali and the other Aryan, Sanskrit-derived languages of Northern India. The bo-tree at Bodhgaya, in Northern India

LAND WITHOUT SORROW (contd.)

Brief History (contd.)

under which the Lord-Buddha sat until he achieved enlightenment, no longer exists, so that its supposed descendant at Anuradhapura is now the holist bo-tree in the world. Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and the mountaintop, impregnable fortresses of Sigirya [built by a mad king who murdered his father to seize the throne, then reigned in paranoid fear until he was himself murdered by his brother] are former Sinhalese royal cities in the centre of the island: all had eventually to be abandoned and were occupied by Tamil invaders from the Tamil Chola kingdom of South India which, from the 7th century A.D. on, harassed the Sinhalese of Sri Lanka and drove them ever further southward, though some, again, aver than the Tamils had never left Sri Lanka and had simply retreated before Prince Vijaya to Jaffna, in the north of the island, their present stronghold. Death by elephant was a common punishment for criminals in all Buddhist kingdoms - in which the elephant is a sacred animal, symbolising the god-kingship - of South & Southeast Asia. The mountain atop which the Buddha or Adam or the prophet is supposed to have left his footprint is called Adam's Peak and is climbed by thousands of pilgrims of various religions every year. Mara is the demon who, with his daughters and his artifices, unsuccessfully tried to tempt the Lord Buddha to abandon his ascetic life. **Singh** [as in Sinhalese, Singapore, and the surname universally adopted by Sikhs] means "lion" in Sanskrit/Pali; **Lanka** also means "lion.")

LAND WITHOUT SORROW (contd.)

The Passenger

Yes, it recedes
as you do, Herath, seventeen years old,
buck-toothed, dark skinned, not unattractive kid.
"Un petit guide."

Like a pulled tooth
whose hologram remains yet daily throbs less
Sri Lanka slips away. The lion people.

They stopped the bus. They were all high on something
- murder, or drugs. I recall their bright, flowered
red-and-green sarongs, as they asked our name and race;
I remember the Moslem boys who shouted "Muslim" in fear.
I remember... the passenger.
Fat, middle-aged man. He must have been about fifty,
moon-faced, full-bellied, full of himself. He wasted
no thought, you may be sure, on other travellers.
He'd boarded the bus at one of the short stops
in one of those ominously silent small towns
of empty streets, boarded-up shops and houses,
we'd been passing through. So he **had** been forewarned,
but money-grubbing and business were more important
as they always are. He swore he was Sinhalese
when they came for him, but of course they'd no trouble
recognising a black Tamil, in **that** country.
The bloated face dims in memory. He was wearing
well-made, expensive red leather chappals
which he left perforce behind, by his seat,
when they dragged him from the bus
and began to stone and beat him. I saw
rolling, imploring, terrified white eyeballs
like agates tossed by boys in a game of pitch.
And then the driver bulled on through the crowd
- scattering coloured sarongs in all directions -
turned the corner of the road, where a savaged car
still smouldered, with its charred body at the wheel,
and a group of women and children frantically
waved us to stop. In vain. Then we saw Badulla
burning at fourteen separate points. (I counted.)
And I never learned what became of the passenger
or even of his chappals. May they profit someone.
They - made of the hide of some slaughtered animal
by Muslim shoemakers or untouchables -
were - are - the only mark he left on Earth
- his bright and battered sandals.

LAND WITHOUT SORROW (contd.)

The Passenger (contd.)

(Note: Chappals are sandals. The echo of Hopkins in the last line is of course deliberate. Badulla was the first of the hill towns of south-central Sri Lanka which we reached [via three separate buses] from the east coast in our attempt to get back to Colombo, and the first to be burned down by "them" - the mysterious mobs of rioters, unrecognisable to anybody from the area, who, transported and supplied with gasoline and firebombs by the military and police, [who then crossed their arms and stood by and did nothing], appeared suddenly in almost all the hill towns and set fire to every business or house owned by a Tamil. We saw Badulla, in a night of chaos during which no one could sleep and in which we had to seek refuge with an old man living alone on the edge of town [since no one could penetrate into the downtown area], almost completely destroyed: only smoking ruins remained of the centre of the city the next day.)

LAND WITHOUT SORROW (contd.)

Hotel Souveni

(apologies to Chateaubriand and Nabokov)

Te souvient-il, ti-frère sauvage,
de ces montagnes, ce paysage?

Te souvient-il, ti-frère chéri,
de l'hôtel, coin du paradis?

Do you recall, brother, the smell of pitch pine
on the hills above that town? Do you still savour

salted rice with jaggery and cinnamon
we ate for breakfast? And the **thali** - sixteen curries!

Remember those two days of curfew when,
having no alternative, and being men,

we explored each centimetre of each other's body?
Do you recall your first taste of arrack, toddy?

Do you remember the cool, scented air of the mountain
that wafted through our room, the TV repeating

wild messages from some Minister of Disinformation,
the BBC shortwave news at six, intoning

"Riots are spreading in the island republic.
Hundreds are dead. All communications cut."?

Pitch-pine hotel. The owner was a burgher,
a Catholic, a De Silva or De Souza.
His wife, a Buddhist. We were well protected.

We went (despite the curfew) on short walks
over the fragrant hills, but does your memory

retain the quintessential smell - sweet, garlicky odour

coming at intervals, on the mountain wind,
over those two days, from the garish Hindu kovil
a hundred green metres below us, where compassionate Buddhist arsonists
- among the multiarmed statues of Shiva and Kali -
had locked two Hindu priests to burn and die?

LAND WITHOUT SORROW (contd.)

Hotel Souveni (Contd.)

(Note: The town in this case is Bandarawela, another hill station. **Jaggery** is the brown sugar made from the sap of coconut palm or the palmyra [sugar palm], usually sold in cakes. A **thali** is a meal of white rice accompanied by many little side dishes of different kinds of curry. **Arrack** is an Arabic word [cf. Turkish rakí] meaning any kind of distilled alcohol, variously from sugar cane, rice or coconut. **Toddy** is palm wine, fermented palm sap. **Kovil** is the Tamil name for a Hindu temple.)

LAND WITHOUT SORROW (contd.)

The Blossoms

In luscious, almost edible
banana and tangerine
robes, they strolled through the bazaar
and the bagarre.
They did not lift one delicate, long-nailed finger
to change a people's karma.
(Would the Buddha
have done the same in the same circumstances? Well,
he might at least have lowered his hand to touch
the earth and indicate compassion for
both sides.) Anyhow, the bhikkhu strolled amongst
the ruins of - not culture, let's say a polity,
a modus vivendi, a shattered nation -
gazed at burned shops, kovils and bodies, tittered
and twittered in their well-bred temple voices
like pretty parakeets
recalling, of course, that **they** were the Elect.
They marched single-file around the artificial lake
- where sixteen Tamil bodies were left floating -
under the raintrees and stared straight ahead
seeing and feeling nothing.
When the desire'd died down (desire is sorrow)
to whack one of them from behind so hard he'd never
know whence retribution came, or better still,
goose one with his own umbrella, I began
to understand their function. They are blossoms,
like poets, gorgeous, useless and dispensable,
growing from the dark humus of human suffering
and longing, but unlike poets,
who are epiphytes, air plants, self-sufficient,
these ones are saprophytes or Venus fly-traps.
Carnivores. And they demand their sacrifice
- to achieve **that** detachment, **that** serenity -
of human flesh.

(Note: This poem is set in Kandy, the "holy" Buddhist city of Sri Lanka, as the rioting began to die down and life to resume its normal course.)

LAND WITHOUT SORROW (contd.)

Gal Vihara

And still, you tried.
No one listened when you said you were not God,
When you said there was no need for God. No one listened.
You never even wrote your teachings down,
because you could not write, great Prince Siddharta.
When asked about your memorial you placed
a begging-bowl upside down on the earth, in other words,
a mound, simplest of tombs. So immediately after
your death, people began to worship mounds,
a bo-tree, elephant, a midnight horse,
and then to cast the thousand million idols
of you that are placated with food offerings,
decked with garlands, daubed with gold leaf, today.
Deities multiply, jatakas, Bodhisattvas,
Maitreyas, faith healers, saints and charlatans.
From there, a simple step to White and Green Tara,
Avalokiteshwara, lamas, god-kings,
the angry gods, the tutelary fiends,
each more grisly and grim than his predecessor,
each with his cannibal consort, sipping blood
from a silver-plated skull, wearing her crown
of crania, her girdle of severed heads,
and trampling on mankind with its poor passions.
Shiva and Kali. Back they creep again.
The warring monks of Zen. The martial arts.
The usual progression. Still, you tried.

Now here, in chartreuse jungle,
near a ruined kingly town, a scant few days
before your followers begin to slaughter
the Tamil idol-worshippers whose ancestors
destroyed that town, I meet you threefold, gigantic,
teaching, meditating, reaching Nirvana.
Didactic composure of teaching features, saying
"Really, nothing can be taught." Infinite fatigue
(you tried, you tried) of the Nirvana sleeper.
But, above all, the pain of the meditant
(who sees he does not see and at the same time
wants not to see. Not anymore. To sleep):
contracted eyes, flaring nose, pursed stone lips,
contemplating mankind and all its sorrows.
Desire is sorrow? You knew that, Siddharta.
The life of the hot senses left you cold
as dry ice. Nevertheless, fasting Siddharta
is a sick joke better reserved for survivors

LAND WITHOUT SORROW (contd.)

Gal Vihara (contd.)

of Buchenwald and Dachau than for glutinous Thais
and plump Tibetan monks who could never resist
yak meat and butter. ("It is permitted to eat
the flesh of animals already slain
by others, but never to kill them. We must also consider
the protein needs of altitude," according to
His Holiness the Dalai Lama - who knows.)

Simplest of fables. The prince descends to the town
for the first time - perhaps he has reached majority -
from his palace luxury and revels, sees
an aged man, a sick man and a dead man,
enquires the meaning of these phenomena
(some pageant contrived for the entertainment
at his anniversary? or some intricate plot
for his enlightenment, or banishment?)
and is answered, and learns of human life.

Prince, prince, beware, do not visit the city.
Prince, prince, your banishment begins with pity.

And, still, your features with their still stone smile.

The brown boy, sitting on a rock across
from the gray stone myths in their cavernous recess,
being a modern youth, lights up a joint,
slowly inhales. And perhaps he has a point.

(Note: Gal Vihara is actually a set of four rockcut images of the Buddha, in different postures, which can be interpreted in different ways, in a sort of open-mouthed small cave or outcropping, among the ruins of the old Sinhalese capital of Polonnaruwa. The sculptures are very fine, but one of them is supposed by many scholars not to represent the Buddha at all, but rather one of his disciples, mourning his death. It happens to be the one I like best, and I have chosen to read its meaning in my own way. The **jataka** is stories, usually in the form of painted temple murals, of the Buddha's past incarnations and lives. In early Theravada Buddhism, human representations of the Buddha were forbidden, and he was represented as a stupa, a bo-tree, etc. The deities and fiends mentioned in lines 17-25 belong to Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and are of course largely borrowed, with a change of name, from Hinduism. Maitreya is the future Buddha who will come to redeem the world. There is also uncertainty about how many representations of human suffering Prince Siddharta encountered on his visits to the city: some accounts include a beggar and a monk.)

LAND WITHOUT SORROW (contd.)

Fruits of the Earth
(apologies to Frederick Philip Grove)

In two short weeks, ripened by sex and death,
by drugs and drink, by love and violence,
can you forgive me, Herath, me who robbed you
of the freshest bloom on all fruit - innocence?

I plucked you from your village, tasted you,
tossed you back there to rot away the years
of hopeless, aimless longing. Too soon, Herath,
in your green teardrop island, you'll know tears.

Farewell, Dear Reader

The traveller leaves the island. Classic theme:
ships, garlands, handkerchiefs' supreme adieu.
This time, though, the scene's different: airport venue
crowded with hungry refugees - the dream

become nightmare. Time to wake up. The boy? Back in his small village
picking up his small life. Sixty dollars burn
a hole in the torn pocket - paltry return
for a two-week tour through arson, murder, pillage.

At last the travellers and all their bundles
are processed, passports stamped, dutifully we file
across shimmering tarmac, down a broadloomed aisle,
seated, strap seat belts. Tiny Garuda trundles

down a runway, rises through pure air, uneventfully
touches down an hour later, at Tiruchirapalli

in the dark Indian night.

(Note: The second part of line 2 is a translation of Mallarmé's "L'adieu
suprême des mouchoirs" from "Chant Marin." In Hindu mythology, the man-
bird Garuda is Vishnu's mount, or steed. Tiruchirapalli is a city in the South
Indian state of Tamil Nadu.)

Muezzin

When eye discerns
white thread from black
when the white thread
of dawn
bisects
the night's
dark cloth
threading
the needle
of your tower
you mount
blind eye that sings
your piercing
thin cry of faith
winds out across
palm grove, mud town,
white mountains, desert,
oasis, ocean,
from Cape Verde
to the Sulu Sea
hearts and bodies
awakes
gives hope
mercy
meaning
joining the pieces one to
another
in the seamless
garment of faith:
Allahu akbar

Here we lie
in this cell
forty-five men
bent
rusty needles in
brown wool cases;
his head upon
my belly; my feet
against another's
thighs; the chests
rise and fall
slowly: **gmel**,
the small
lice creep
from man to man
in brotherhood;
baq, the bedbug
bites;
rough, cloth-clad
bodies stir,
cough, break wind;
dawn wind
from palm groves
caresses faces
upturned to light
heads pressed
to earth
and a voice
sleep-heavy, hoarse
echoes and soars:
Allahu akbar

And still you call
from your pale tower
wild bird of dawn
blind eye that sees:
"Come to the mosque
come to prayer,
prayer is better,
better than sleep"
your call that pierces
hearts, threads
man to man,
joins the bent needles
in brotherhood
of faith and hope
mercy and meaning
all except me:
the thread that might
have bound me up
was broken
long ago
and I
was formed
a needle
with no eye:
Allahu akbar

m was written Note: This poem was written in the prison of Marrakech, in Morocco. The **muezzin**
call to morning prayer at the hour when the naked eye can distinguish a white from a black
approximately an hour and a half before dawn. Muezzins are often blind, though there is in fact an
against this traditional practice. **Allahu akbar**, of course, means "God is the
s repeated thrice in the prayer-call.)

Karkadé

I tasted the red drink. What was so familiar
about the colour, bittersweet astringent flavour?
And I asked the name. "Karkadé. Made from a flower."
"A pressed red flower?" "Yes, sir, sold in the markets."
Then I recalled. Memory slowly moving in
like winter sun, clearing a cloudy sky.
It belongs to the family of the hibiscus - and okra.
It's useful in curing colds and hangovers.
The Germans, I think, used to call it "Malvenwein."
In the terrible West Indies, it was "sorrel."
But long ago, in the magic México
of my young manhood, we called it "jamaica."
And, yes, I remember, it was his favourite drink.

(Note: **Karkadé** is the Egyptian name of the sorrel or roselle.)

The old man in the brown **djellaba**
(wrinkled, white-bearded, with bright Berber eyes)
sitting at the nearby table looked at us
- the guard and me; he whispered to his friend,
and the friend, another wool-garbed patriarch,
nodded. The small country bus-stop
(was it Ksar-el-Kbir? Larache? Who could remember?)
swarmed with veiled, tattooed women, long-robed men,
beggars and boys and baggage-carriers.
I remember it was a half-hour stop and the guard had consented
to our getting off. He was drinking his mint tea
and lamenting in bad French over this assignment.
I merely sat there. Then the old man came over
to our table; he had bought three shishebabs
for me. He laid the silver plate on the table,
with a fork expertly slid the chunks of lamb from
the glistening spit, and slowly, one by one,
placed them in my mouth. Because I was in handcuffs.

(Note: The third of the five precepts, or "pillars", of Islam is the one enjoining payment of a tithe, or **zakat**, a fixed portion of one's income, for works and deeds of charity, especially to the poor, the unfortunate and travellers. It is this principle, embedded in the heart of their religion, that makes of Muslims perhaps the most generous, hospitable, compassionate people in the world.)

Andrítsena: Painted Pictures

Night. And the plaza of the small Greek town.
Here, just as there, the **paseo**, the **volta**, the strolling
boys, circling, arm in arm, eyeing girls who, however,
do not participate here, wait in the shadows
of five hundred Muslim years, watch, and are watched
by the old women in black. And these village elders
- grey-moustached, black-capped, fondling worry beads -
sipping ouzo, playing dominoes, drinking coffee.
And the inevitable stray tourist is warily eating
suspicious hors d'oeuvres of octopus, vine leaves, fish roe.
In the warm spring air the leaves are growing, springing;
the fingers of grape and mulberry, the great hands of the fig
grope large every day; even the scaly plane-trees
wear small green hearts at last, like late-born hopes.
And the boys are green and springing as the leaves are,
as they circle around and around, wrestle one another,
challenge and boast and laugh, young voices breaking,
resembling no Greek statue ever sculpted
and yet resembling all. They ogle me,
the stranger here; dark, bold glances invite
to somewhere in a deeper, bolder darkness.
And they are all pictures that someone has painted.
For here I do not even know the language;
I cannot speak. I cannot communicate.
One stops me, smiles, asks, perhaps, for a cigarette.
His words bloom, frozen, on the soft night air
and, petals, fall. I cannot give the answer.
Two come around the corner now and pass me,
look back, smile, whisper, circle round again.
They are painted pictures. I do not speak the language.
And I watch them go by.

(Note: Andrítsena is a small town in Central Peloponnesus. The stroll around the plaza at night is called **vóita** in Greek, **paseo** in Spanish America.)

Alcobaça

Fragile tracery
of Gothic towers
deformed jewelled fingers
stabbing a blue sky.
A river. Cherries. Fresh trout in the restaurant.
Green trees. And those peculiar tree-climbing grapevines
(that produce **vinho verde**) everywhere.
Pedro the Cruel. And Inés de Castro,
You were **not** particularly cruel, by the standards
of your epoch. You loved the Spanish Inés
whom your father, King Alfonso, explained you **could not** marry
for dynastic reasons. You persisted. Your father
sent three nobles to her house in Coímbra,
and there they killed her. Two years later, your father
died (of natural causes). You ascended the throne.
You unburied the mouldering bones of Inés de Castro,
had the skeleton crowned as queen of Portugal
in the great Gothic cathedral of Alcobaça.
You made your courtiers kiss those white bone fingers
(and, naturally, had the three nobles executed
- you tore, they say, the hearts out of their breasts).
After that act of expiation, it's told,
you slowly fell apart, of dissipation
and drink; at night, in a black cloak, you roamed the green hills
above Coímbra, calling for Inés,
who never came.
The tombs are there in the church at Alcobaça,
face to face. Stone engravings tell the story
of Pedro's happiness, of the nobles' treachery,
Pedro the Cruel. Inés de Castro.
Spidery old story of mediæval suffering,
of deathless love. Now go to the porno movie
down the street, watch Linda Loveless suck off twenty men,
and meditate on life, and love, and us.
Visit the nearby shrine of Fátima
and ask the Virgin for understanding. Or something.
Eat the trout.
Taste the cherries.
Drink
the
wine.

Alcobaça (contd.)

(Note: Pedro I, the Cruel [more correctly called **O Justiceiro**, "the Just" or "the Severe"], lived from 1320 to 1367 and was king of Portugal from 1357 to 1367. Inés de Castro was murdered in 1355. All the details of this grisly story can be historically verified. Inés was a lady-in-waiting to Pedro's Spanish wife, and, after the wife's death in 1345, Pedro openly lived with [and, some accounts say secretly married] her. King Alfonso's opposition to the union was caused by his fears of various rival claims to the throne of Portugal on the part of any children born to Pedro and Inés - in fact, they had two sons, both of whom later caused trouble as pretenders to the throne - and of the related possibility of the Portuguese throne's ending up in Spanish hands - as also happened, two centuries later. Coímbra was the mediæval capital of Portugal. Pedro should not be confused with his contemporary Pedro I, the Cruel, of Spain, who reigned from 1350 to 1369, and who really **was** cruel. I fear I have confused the rather Romanesque architecture of the cathedral at Alcobaça with the Gothic style of the nearby cathedral of Batalha, but that makes no difference to the poem, of course.)

The House

- I. The house is there, inhabited by others,
of course, yet still essentially unchanged:
sharp roof, white walls, brown door in brown verandah;
if you knocked on that door and spoke to them

they would answer "Yes, we know" or "We remember,"
invite you in, display with pride their realm,
point out that the living room was redecorated
but the dining-room chandelier is still the same,

anxious to please, yet anxious for your going
to exorcise your ghost that walks these rooms,
troubling their peace, one of that chain of phantoms,
ghosts to you, too, calling from distant tombs.

And you would leave, reading in the too-firm handshakes
and fevered smiles the message "Never come
again", go down the worn wood steps, rejoining
that rich, wide, empty world the exile claims.

- II. The house is there, though it has been demolished:
in the same air, in some dim pantomime
it exists, incorporate; it cannot vanish,
without a trace, into the maw of time.

In that bed (where is it now?) life was created;
there in those broken rooms a childhood formed;
in those few yards of space they lived, loved, suffered;
ceiling was sky over their wildest storms.

Those two are gone now, just as all the others;
their ardent choreography is framed
in the night and snow of all picture-albums;
a gravestone susurrates their blurring names.

They are gone now. Does something of them linger
in the spot where they once were flesh and dream,
a **déjà-vu**, an attitude, a fragrance
brief as the afterimage of a flame?

- III. The house is there, invisible companion.
You will live in no other; you but seem
to travel, finding, under alien plumage,
the sharp, familiar features, loved and grim.

You fall asleep each night in the same bedroom;
when dream has veiled the corridors, you climb

The House (contd.)

the stairs and roam the ruined rooms, committing
before the same blind judges, the same crimes.

You are the house now, chamber, beam and rafter;
you are those two, the remembrance and sum
of what they were and could not be, the sequel
of attitude, act, genetics: their **am**.

House and inhabitants, rejected, longed-for,
expelled from memory, are you: you roam
without a resting-place on earth, yet bearing,
tortoise **extraordinaire**, your prison-home.

Merida

Tap the honey
of old poems;
mine
the peace
of the classic shade.
Consider:
the ruined temple
the broken columns
the perfect torso
god-man
satyr
swaying bacchante
the bull-totem
snake-entwined Mithra
deus invictus

three young men
nude and laughing
treading grapes
in the wine-press;
horse and emperor
battling barbarians;
the wild boar
snarling in death;
two wrestling children
caught in amber;
Decius' head;
African slave.

(Note: Not the Mexican but the
Spanish town of Mérida, in west-

Vicarius vixit
three years, nine days;
Lutatia Lupata
played the lute;
Flavia Firmana
buried in her garden
sit tibi
terra levis:
Clodia Urbana
had a last message:
"Eat, drink, laugh,
then follow me."

The small people
working, playing,
dancing together,
fighting off dragons.
And as cold
winter sun rises
over gold walls
of an Arab fortress
illuminates
noise, traffic, fumes
of trucks, cars, men
on the two-thousand-
year-old bridge
spanning a river:
slow sleep falling
on all cities
on all people.

ern Extremadura, formerly one of the most important Roman towns in Spain and full of relics and ruins of the Roman period, is being referred to here. The various objets d'art referred to in the second stanza are collected in the Mérida museum. The inscriptions in the third stanza come from the many funerary stelæ preserved in the town and are mostly conventional formulæ: "**vixit**" = "lived; "**sit tibi terra levis**" = "May the earth lie light upon you." Decius was a third-century Roman emperor who died fighting the barbarians in 250 A.D. Mithra, an Eastern-Persian deity, was much worshipped by soldiers in the latter days of the Roman Empire: he represented the spirit of divine light. Mérida was also long under Moorish domination: the fortress is Arab, the bridge Roman.)

Eine Kleine Nachtmusik

They have gone away, and now the night is here.
I loved the brightness, while the brightness lasted.
But if the dark is starless, it is clear.

I'd thought the desert was more bleak, more sere,
not these strange cities, half-preserved, half-blasted
that have gone away, and now the night is here.

The end of having was the end of fear.
I was a man; I felt, I saw, I tasted,
and if my dark is starless, **that** is clear.

Once I had visitors, sensual and austere:
they came with music, dusk-limbed, subtle-wristed.
They have gone away. And now the night is here.

In the port, importunate sailors, ships that steer
to other lands: tall and proud and white-masted;
but if my dark is starless, it is clear.

I loved a boy and left a frozen tear;
I look back on the life, the lives I've wasted.
They have gone away, and now the night is here.
Still, if the dark is starless, it **is** clear.

Grand Canal

He wanted to go with me to Venice,
the young beach-boy that I met in Cannes.

He'd always dreamed of going to Venice,
because his name (he said) was Marc.

Cannes: imitation Rio de Janeiro,
artificial beaches, artificial palms.

But there was nothing artificial about **him**:
he'd run away from his northern home.

His cock was big, and he used it proudly,
although (he said) he was just sixteen.

Of course, I was drunk and spent money on him,
and I had money, and he had none.

But he slept with me in cheap rooming-houses,
and he shaved me when my drunk hand shook.

All right, I said, we'll go to Venice,
we'll see gold mosaics, we'll see St. Mark's,

we'll visit the islands, the Doges' Palace,
we'll ride together in the Grand Canal,

and we'll sleep together in cheap rooming-houses,
eat in trattorias and make love.

So we made a date to meet the next week
at the station, and take the eastbound train.

We made a date for the following Tuesday,
then I went back to the countryside

to think it over and talk it over
and decided to visit Barcelona instead.

Yes, I left him waiting at the station,
and I went to Barcelona instead.

So he never went with me to Venice.
I never learned if his name **was** Marc.

We never went together to Venice.
And we'll never ride the Grand Canal.

Ruin Hath Taught Me Thus to Ruminare...

Of course, when you've seen one, you've seen them all.
An imperial style is nothing if not
imperialistic, and each **colonia**
was a faithful copy of a master plan
from Rome, already borrowed from the Greeks.
The same Corinthian columns, same acanthus leaf
and capital, the same capitol, the same forum,
the same temples to the same gods and genii,
theatres, amphitheatres, circi, cisterns,
baths, aqueducts, and of course triumphal arches.
The Bauhaus of the second century: simple, practical
style, little dangerous imagination
or innovation, but symmetry: clean lines
(learned from the Greeks), also **some** ostentation
and vulgarity (red paint, oversized statues
of emperors, with their detachable heads).
Solidity, above all. **These** built to last.
And last they did, through Vandals, Arabs, Turks,
Berbers and Byzantines, crusader zealots,
into our era of the final fall. Why does one visit them,
these ruins, with their identical shattered palaces
and pillars, and the strange half-classical,
half-savage names: Volubilis, Timgad,
Bealbek, Jaresh, Palmyra, Dougga, Efes?
If they were in mint condition or perfectly
restored, who would even want to look at them
at all? Who's really interested in sports arenas'
architecture, or the æsthetics of the façades
of Victorian banks and railway stations? What
do you come to learn?

Always the same names on arches and altars,
the reassuring, familiar Trajan, Hadrian,
Antoninus Pius, going lonelier
with Marcus Aurelius, foreign, with Septimius Severus;
and the rot setting in, Commodus, Caracalla,
Heliogabalus, Gordianus, Decius,
"In the thirteenth year of Alexander Severus...."

Always the same small white and yellow flowers
blooming out of rubble, carpeting the hillocks
- sweet alyssum, dandelion, transatlantic cousins
of the buttercup. The same small white- or horehound-
shelled snails, **ghilil**, clinging to stone and stem, eaten
by country people still - no doubt in **their** day also...
Always the same brown children, older than Rome
and sad as ruins, proffering hopelessly

Ruin Hath Taught Me Thus to Ruminare (Cont.)

statuettes, oil-lamps and **real** Roman coins.
Always the guide, dropping down suddenly beside you
like a mountain-goat, from some crag, in rough peasant cloak.
He is eighteen or twenty or perhaps seventy-five;
he speaks six languages (badly) and is of course
the sole support of a family of twelve,
and business is bad these days; you're today's only tourist
(shyly, slyly fondling an eager, growing bulge,
under Biblical robe, that promises Turkish
or Tunisian delights - hors de programme).
He offers the ritual
visits to villas paved with still bright mosaics
of fishermen in cockle-shell boats and cupids
sporting on dolphins' backs in a **mer poissonneuse**;
of gladiators fighting animals in arenas;
of hunting, farming, lions pouncing on gazelles;
the eager eagle raping Ganymede;
Venus Impudica at her toilette; Leda
and the Swan; drunken Silenus; Orpheus charming
beasts of the wild; and finally, finally,
the broken stelæ, the violated sarcophagi
in the necropolis; the imperial public
shithouse with its dozen unpartitioned orifices;
and as always
as always
the stone cock and balls pointing
the way to the brothel.

(Note: This poem was written in Tunisia, basically about a visit to the Roman ruins of Dougga, but the Roman cities referred to in lines 23-24 are variously in Morocco, Algeria, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey. The emperors mentioned in the second stanza are those of the second and the first half of the disastrous third century A.D., when the Roman Empire began to decline, slowly, at first, after the death of Marcus Aurelius while fighting the barbarians on the frontier in 180 A.D., more precipitately after the murder of the "good" emperor Alexander Severus by the Prætorian Guard in 235 A.D. Septimius Severus was a Libyan, the first foreigner [other than Spaniards] to occupy the imperial throne. All the designs mentioned are extremely common subjects of Roman mosaics. Some aver that the stone testicles and phallus pointed the way to the public toilets, not to the brothels, but I prefer my version. Most of these Roman cities of North Africa and the Near East date from the second and third centuries A.D.; desert or near-desert conditions and lack of resettlement have preserved them far better than the ruins of Italy and Greece proper, in most cases.)

Dome of the Rock

God was not love or law,
God was the blood I saw,
the ever-flowing blood
staining water and sod.

Irving Layton, "Orpheus"

Below, the Jews rock at their Wailing Wall:
the dark, stiff-bearded, proud Hassidic Jews;
tourist Jews in hot shirts and paper beanies;
survivors, both? Perhaps. They nod and pray
while an old Pole rains down death on Arab towns
in their name, death on Arab cities like the one
that spreads its tentacles of shop, dark alley
and hate around them here, through which they wend
to prayer, uncomprehending, as before.

Pauvre peuple maudit. From having been
prisoners of **mellah** and ghetto, to become
colons in their own country, which they know
will vanish like the others - Maccabees,
Hasmoneans, Herodians, Crusaders.

The Chosen People - of what mocking God?
Here above, on this mound they cannot enter,
where Solomon and Herod built their temples,
which foreigners destroyed, where the Holy of Holies
lies forever hidden, inexcavable,
rude Arab guards shout at Gentile sightseers
strolling among stiff cypresses and cedars:
No entrance here! No shoes! No immodest dress
Religion's endless litany of "no's."

There is the Golden Gate, where Jesus entered
the city on his donkey, Eternal Ass,
but you cannot approach, follow his steps;
the Arabs have blocked it up, for Jewish legend
says the Messiah will enter here, and **they**
want nothing of **Him**: they await the **Mahdi**.
(Although these walls are not Herodian, anyhow;
they were built by Suleiman the Magnificent,
a Turk, in the sixteenth century). That dome
of silver is El Aqsa, the Western Mosque,
westernmost point of all Muhammad's wanderings
(physical and mental ones, for he **flew** here).
Built by Ommayyads, made a church by Crusaders,
restored by Saladin (a Kurd),
set on fire by an Australian (or was he Jordanian?
- identities soon blur in the Middle East)
twelve years ago. A guide will show the spot
where a Palestinian gunned down King Abdallah

Dome of the Rock (contd.)

as he left his Friday prayers, thirty years ago.
Thirty years? Thirty centuries of hate! Below,
the Jews stick messages to God in crannies
of their Wall (all they have left), mumble and nod.
Black suits, white shawls, skull-caps. The Arab merchants,
defying Shabbat, wearing other kinds
of skull-caps, or keffiyehs, work the tourists
from those dark shops where they sprawl and smile and bargain
and hate all day, moving like snakes, to strike.
Arab women in the rich, red embroidery
of Guatemalan Indians squat, sell their wares.
The enemy? What if the enemy
is oneself? One's own self-doubt? One's masochism,
or a guilty conscience? (Didn't **that** concept
arise with this Chosen People, anyway?)
Down by the gate where Stephen, first Christian martyr,
was stoned to death, Arab children celebrate
Id-El-Fitr, in their new clothes, eating **felaffect**,
riding donkeys, mounting wooden ferris-wheels
spun by two brawny men, shrieking with delight
as the wheel rises five metres: **these** belong.
This is their land, their home, their festival.
No one can take it from them. The Other People
come from everywhere and nowhere. **Where is here?**
They have no answer, self-fulfilling prophets,
knowing what's taken must be given back,
a paranoid people, always remembering
Ahab and Naboth's vineyard and Elijah,
and the dogs shall lick the blood of Jezabel.
Approach the dome of gold now, with its blue
and green faïence tiles, given by King Hussein;
geometric lozenges, and an endless ribbon
of calligraphy proclaiming God is Great
and Beautiful and Only and Supreme.
Enter, and in the darkness you'll behold,
looming up craggily, the rock.
The peek of Mount Moriah. The first land
to emerge from primal seas, when God's hand pointed;
and it will be the last, legend says, to sink
in the final fire; that chain hanging from the dome
points down to the exact centre of the earth
(as all chains do - but let us not be quibblers).
This the mountaintop where Abraham
lured Isaac (Muslims say it was Ishmael,
and Samaritans - who still exist - insist
it's a different mountain), his best-loved son,
to sacrifice him blindly to an angry

Dome of the Rock (contd.)

God in a burning bush. That God was pleased
by His servant's obedience, stayed his hand, sent an angel,
and placed a sheep conveniently nearby,
in a thicket's completely irrelevant
to the fact that blood was spilt to please a God
innocent blood was spilled on the Holy Rock
to please a primitive God that lives on blood.
Abraham, father of three religions,
all drenched in blood. In a few weeks, the Muslims
will celebrate the feast of the Sacrifice.
Already they are fattening sheep; each family
(even those living in apartment houses;
the sound of baaing fills the quiet nights)
has a pet ram now that is fed and coddled,
paraded by proud children on daily walks,
with its fat tail, pink ribbon and pink paint mark.
It thinks it's loved, and it responds with love,
quite unsuspecting that, early on the feast day
the father of the family will slit
its throat, spill its blood ritually, till it dies,
while those same children watch, grave-eyed with wonder,
then eat it, make a rug out of its skin.
The blood-soaked human race! This is the rock
whence Muhammad one night, on his poet's wings
and his Pegasus, El Burak, sprang to the seventh Heaven,
talked there with God, with prophets and with angels,
and brought his message back, of justice, mercy,
forgiveness - and blood, too. Scant miles from here,
over dry rolling hills, the other one,
the lonely one, the man on the donkey,
who tried (and failed) to send a different message,
was born. Within three days his birth was marked
by blood - the Slaughter of the Innocents.
He said "This is my body. This is my blood."
"Take ye and eat. Take ye and drink." They did.
He died in blood, and three hundred yards away
(in a dark church which five denominations
control and fight over, and which **they** claim
is the earth's **real** centre) his body lies.
(It does **not** lie there, naturally: "He is risen";
though Muslims say he did not even die;
another was crucified in his place; he rose
to heaven, and will return at the end of time
when Mount Moriah burns; an empty tomb
awaits him at Medina, beside the Prophet;
and many Protestants believe the body
lays in another spot, outside the walls

Dome of the Rock (contd.)

of this strange city.) The Dome of the Rock.
Look around now in the cool octagon
with its circling windows - clearly Byzantine,
which of course means an imitation of the Roman -
and the columns holding it up are Corinthian;
it was built originally by an Ommayyad caliph,
used also by the Crusaders - how one tires
of names, facts, history's burden! I softly pad
on red Rabat carpets given by the King
of Morocco, circle round and round the Rock
and look up
into a fantasy of red and gold
arabesques
calligraphy
stylised vegetation
and no human form,
infinite yearning for the unknown God,
Maker of all, the Beautiful, the One,
faceless and formless, pure spirit, pure good.
The children shriek with happiness at their funfair.
An old Pole rains down death on Arab towns.
Below the Jews wail at their Western Wall,
forever damned. I stare down at the Rock.
But the Rock runs red with blood!

(Note: This poem should succeed in offending everybody, and I do not feel like annotating it; it is largely self-explanatory, and its references will be clear to anyone who knows anything about the Bible, Christianity, Islam and/or Jerusalem. The phenomenon I refer to in the last line is of course the afterimage that would appear on the rock if one switched one's gaze to it after a long time spent staring at the red-and-gold dome.)

Taverna "Ta Tsekoúria"

They'll be uncurling now
and growing
the great, green
half-formed
hands of the fig-tree,
of the limb that stretched
from near the doorway
right through the tavern
and out the window,
always seeking
in that alien medium
of human, animal
eaters and drinkers
earth, air, light, water
- its true elements.

Why the tavern
was called "The Axes",
how long the tree had grown,
I never knew,
but on hot summer nights
I'd sit in the shadow
of those huge leaves
lighted from above,
look up, into
veins, stomata
and understand
(or try to, anyway)
life, infinitely slow,
absorbed, absorbent
dumb lie of life,
mutation of elements,
remote from all our
consumption, excretion,
our febrile motion,
but life, unmistakably.
And I'd consume
rice-stuffed vine-leaves,
yoghurt and cucumber,
fish-roe salad,
drink the harsh retsina,
hear the foreign music
and watch the patrons
at other tables
happy, talking,
gesticulating, singing
in their strange language.

In autumn the leaves

were turning yellow,
the intolerable summer's
spell was broken.

And I was growing
tired of stuffed vine-leaves,
pentatonic music
and retsina,
but I still came
for, if I knew no one
in that foreign city
of gregarious natives
and an unknown language,
I still could imagine
I knew the fig-tree
- its slow, imperceptible
vegetable life.

In winter it rained
and the last leaves fell,
but the bark was silver,
new buds were swelling,
and I came again
- I brought a boy once
I'd finally picked up,
a country boy
from the Morea
whom I could not speak to,
who could not speak to me,
to share the fig-tree
and music with me,
for one last drink
of the harsh retsina,
one last plate
of rice-stuffed vine-leaves,
now that I was leaving.

Now in the spring
of another country,
hot desert city
where no trees bud,
I remember the fig-tree,
the half-formed hands
that will now be growing,
stomata, veins;

Taverna "Ta Tsekoúria" (Contd.)

I remember and set down

this simple record
of a taverna,
of a mute friendship,
welcome shade
- a foreign city
- a boy from Morea
- an unknown language
- stuffed vine-leaves, music
and the harsh retsina!

(Note: "Ta Tsekoúria" in Greek means "The Axes", a name which I puzzled over [since the proprietor was obviously a tree-lover, not a tree-cutter] until I discovered the prosaic truth, that the tavern's real name was "O Tsekoúris", named after Mr. Tsekoúris, the owner. I still prefer, once more, my own version, however. This well-known tavern in the Plaka in Athens has a fig tree growing through it, as described. **Morea** ["mulberry leaf"] is another name for the Peloponnesus. The fig tree is to me [most unBiblically] a symbol of fertility and renewed hope [I don't know why]; this is why it recurs in so many of my poems. This poem was written in Egypt, remembering Greece.)

The Man in the Village

The man with the sparse hair and the white moustache,
in that village where the asphodels were blooming
and the winter wind howled through the rainy night,
when I asked in the square what time the bus passed through,
informed me, shook hands, then took me by the arm
and led me to the thirteenth-century church
(he had the key; he must have been the sexton),
where blackened, crumbling murals display the Baptist
regarding his own head, the death of the Virgin,
then invited me to his house for a cup of coffee.
A strange, low, rambling structure he must have inherited
from his family; rooms full of beds and couches,
yet: "I live alone. I have no family."
He hobbled out painfully to get coffee and sugar,
mixed and heated them in a little pewter kettle,
poured the thick black drink into a small white cup
to cool, and asked me questions. I answered,
but I was waiting, watchful, for the question
that might or might not come, until it slipped out,
painfully, slowly, as I knew it had to do
with no encouragement or help from me.
The Swedish porno mags, one after another,
with their repellent ice blondes, their nude coupling crudeness,
their ultimate hard Nordic commercial coldness.
And the old man turned the pages, talked of summer
when the hippies come, and the young Italians - so hot! -
and I knew why so many beds. Then he brought out
the pornographic playing cards, flipped through them for me
and muttered "sex" with a question intonation,
tenderly placed his hand on my knee, groped himself,
murmuring pleadingly, tentatively, "sex" again.
While I stayed cold as Canada. No arousal.
I was tired. I was in the region for isolation
and writing, not for games or even friendship.
And he was **so** old and creepy. I assumed
my air of embarrassment, of mild annoyance,
of religious rectitude, perhaps, or straightness,
left the coffee untouched, put on my coat, got up,
left him behind his door. But karma was working,
as it always does, for at night, when I'm alone
with my fears and sadness, in my bleak hotel rooms,
I have begun to become the man in the village.
(His winter nights, waiting behind his door
His Onliness.) The one. The Village Queer.

Estes Olhos que a Terra Há-de Comer

In all the bright lands of the earth
my eyes have seen too much
sex, action, auction, death and birth,
in all! The bright lands of the earth
offer no food for the soul's dearth;
the pilgrim finds no crutch
in all the bright lands. Of the earth
my eyes have seen? - too much!

The Mourning Cloak

First butterfly of spring.

Vanessa camberwellensis.

The Camberwell Beauty.

What inadequate names to describe you, butterfly
(even your comical appellative - a London suburb!),
as you alight on my plate, fresh from a winter

of dry leaves, of endurance as a spiked, hideous
caterpillar, as a chrysalid swaying to winds.

Cream-and-chestnut miracle, sporting your row
of violet dots,
you sip my sweet pale tea, with that proboscis
uncoiled, erect as any precision spring.

Do you know I could kill you, butterfly, I could smash you
with this hand and wipe out what fifteen billion years
of evolution have achieved?

You fan the lovely, God-created wings
proudly before me.

And go on sipping.

Your span a month. You fly, you mate, you die.
You live on nectar. And pollinate flowers.

Out of the ruin of Canada, of winter
you rise to dance the only dance that matters.

Fly away now. Do not be too trustful of me.
Human beings are deep, but cruel. They are not firm friends.
We are dangerous dwarfs.

Your Canadian name too - how Canadian!
"Admonition for spring." In the mating season
a reminder of death, of endless winter.

Stop before you unfurl your iridescent wings and take off.
Take me with you on your flight. Where shall we go?

To Bali? To Brazil? Decide, butterfly.
I am your flight companion.

But my wings fail me. They will not function, they
drag me to earth. I cannot follow you.

For an Egyptian Boy

What I thought could never be broken - broke.
Then let me
don your colours. Let me wear the mourning cloak.

Had I not tried to seduce you
I would not know beauty's message
and I'd not be worthy of it.

Riding Pillion in Pangandaran

Drink in odour of his body, drink
rich smell of sweat, streaming from every pore:
bask in his hair's dark sparkle; do not think:
arms glued to his firm waist, you are you no more.

Let the wind dry those beads formed on your brow
by civilisation's noise and poisons; see
the lovely, moving world fly past you: now
is all you have and all you'll ever be.

Green palms bend tasselled heads on either side
to form an arch of triumph for his path;
wild air jets round you both as you two ride
those bodies which are life and will be death.

We are going to pick mushrooms in the meadows,
magic mushrooms, conjured from buffalo shit
by life's arcane processes; Lovell Beddoes
must have written a poem somewhere about it.

Following this boy will take you straight to hell.
Yes, and so what? Each joy must have its pain.
While the altered body cries out in each cell:
"You are alive. You will not live again."

(Note: Pangandaran is a small beach resort on the south coast of Java.)

The Tuak Shop

In that village at night
- no electricity, no cinema, only the flicker
of fireflies and the treefrog's lonely chirp -
the young men gather in the **tuak** shop;
they come about eight or nine, four boys, two guitars,
and sing.

The music - who knows where it came from once?
I heard the selfsame swooping melodies
twenty-five years ago in México.

I've heard them in the **fado** bars of Lisbon,
in the Colombian hills - **huaino**, **bambuco** - ,
Peru, Bolivia, they are the music
of the broken yet yearning human heart.

And the cold night wind blows into the **tuak** shop
from green, volcanic mountains; sprinkled starlight
alone illuminates a darkened world.

Tuak? White viscous liquid, slightly alcoholic,
gathered from coconut or sugar palm,
and slightly nauseating. But the music!

Unearthly harmonies. Who taught this to them?

Portuguese from Malacca? Missionaries?

Strayed sailors? And the sad young village men,
wasting their lives on an island in a lake,
sing and soar: "Oh, my father. You were a singer.

You wanted me to be a troubadour.

Now you would be happy, father. I am a singer.

But, father, you are dead." But **I** still listen!

(Note: This was written at Lake Toba, in Sumatra, in the country of the Christian Batak people, "the singing Bataks," who are famed in Indonesia for their extraordinarily beautiful four-part-harmony singing. The origins of this music, which **sounds** very Latin, are unknown. **Bambuco** and **Huaine** are rather similar, mournful Andean songs from South America.)

Karadut

On the way back from Nemrut Dağı (inaccessible
terrible statues of hybrid gods, of a mad king
staring eyeless, mindless, under cold rock sun,
and a fifty-metre-high pile of small chipped stones),
our taxi halts: a loaded truck has slid
into the trap laid between a slim stream forming
on the left and the patch of road which the villagers
are desperately repairing before the snows come.
This was early October.
I was the last tourist, perhaps, till May.
So we had to stop in the tiny, green, rocky, descending
hilltown which maybe had never had a tourist
before. I asked its name. "Karadut. That means 'blackberry.'
Because there're so many here." And in fact they grew
in all stages of being, dawn-blue flower to glossy fruit,
everywhere by the road. Children offered them to me.
Kurdish girls hawked strange fezzes with night-glow patches.
And the women wore clashing, luminescent colours.
Curious, friendly. Yet distant. So far distant.
Light-years in race and time. Religion. Language.
We lay in a field under fig trees. Mehmet asked me
was I happy here? Did I like the life? Truly, I was happy.
We ate flat, unleavened bread and sweet green figs
(red as strawberry jam inside) brought to us by a boy,
and we answered questions. Where was I from?
Amerika?? Kanada??
Bewildered faces. Another planet. A far world spinning
in space and time. Is there work there? Do you have mosques?
And muezzins? What do you speak? What are the women like?
Are you married? How much do you earn each month?
How many wives? How many children? questions tumbling
from mouths innocent and hungry as children's.
And then I began really to see Karadut.
Fig, blackberries, pomegranates, isolation.
And myself. Traveller. **Misâfir**. Almost sacred being.
Every thing **they** could never be. (Never wished to be.
But an alternative. To a life they'd also never wished.)
And this was a great moment for Karadut:
an **almán**, a tourist, captive in their village.
And beautiful, guileful children came to stare at us,
and cautious, brilliant women - at a distance -
and bloomed, moustachio'd men: not because of me
- poor, aging fool - but of what I represented.
Six months of the year, Mehmet said, snow- and rain-bound.
Their life is hard. But above all it's boring.
They sense what it could be, but cannot grasp it.
Yet with that uncanny skill of village people

Karadut (Contd.)

(who can always manage contingency, though not fate)
they improvised levers from boards and barrels, lifted
the truck from the ditch; donkeylike, with pushes, it moved on
(while severe, skullcapped elders murmured **inchallah**).

And then we could go, and we veered on down the mountain,
down the dangerous gravel road, past blackberry bushes,
past pomegranate trees, past the stone houses,
past supplicating hands of fig and mulberry,
and we said a last goodbye to Karadut.

(Note: Atop Nemrut Dağı - Nimrod's Mountain - a 9000-foot mountain, of very difficult access, in southeastern Turkey. The insane Roman vassal king Antiochus I Commagenus [69-34 B.C.] of Commagene, as the region southeast of Cappadocia was then called, built a place of worship for the Hellenist religion he himself had founded whose pantheon consisted mostly of Greek gods, with himself as principal deity. "Shattered visages" - including the enormous head of Antiochus, torsos, and the pile of chipped stones - perhaps meant for a temple - is all that remains. The 30 million Muslim Kurds, of Indo-European [Iranian] stock, have never had a national state, live scattered over Eastern Turkey & Syria, and Northern Iraq & Iran, permanently suppressed by and in revolt of local authorities. Some 10 million live in Turkey, where even their language is prohibited. Alman [German] is the Turkish name for the tourist.)

Harran

Mud houses, singularly shaped, like cones
or termite mounds. The Mesopotamian sun.
And an endless plain. So like Saskatchewan.
Children with brown faces, yet oddly pale.
And those bizarre bee-hives. A whole village of them.
Abraham stopped here in his peregrination
from Ur of the Chaldees to Canaan land;
the carp in the local lake are sacred to him,
or so they say. They? History, stories, men.
A ruined Ommayyad minaret. And towers.
A Roman arch. A well. A castle. All
crumbling to earth, from which these strange excrescent
termite houses have arisen.
"But why do they live this way? What's the advantage
of living in cones? Why does no other village
do the same thing?" I ask my driver
(patient, sad, dignified man, with walrus moustache,
who'd brought me there for the ruins, not the houses)
persistently in ridiculous book-Turkish,
irked at his shrugs (though he cannot mistake
my meaning), till at last, exasperated,
he spits out the real, single-worded answer:
"Fakir." "They are poor." That **is** my only answer.

(Note: Harran is a village of great age south of Urfa in extreme Southeastern Turkey, near the Syrian border. It is actually a bit of Syria - the bee-hive house is typical of Syria, as I later discovered while travelling in that country - which got included in Turkey in 1939 when the French returned to Turkey Antakya [Antioch] and other parts of Southern Turkey which they had annexed after World War 1 to their Syrio-Lebanese League-of-Nations-mandated territory.)

Theophánia

It was your ordinary small café,
full of old men, newspapers, smoke, ouzo, coffee
- when God walked in. With a beard and a strange black robe
bearing a stripe, embroidered in green and gold,
symbolic, I suppose, of spring, rebirth.
Outside, polluted Athens, its milling streets
of leafless, pollarded trees, the winter rain.
Dead city. Dead culture. Under its acropole.
Inside, I drank retsina with my sailor friends
- a Chilean, a Honduran, a boy from Mozambique -
forgettable, forgotten. But God came by,
brushed my forehead with a bush - **vassiliká** -
gave me a crucifix to kiss. And blessed me.
An epiphany, a moment.
Then God walked out. I drank on with my friends;
the café returned to its usual busy hum.

(Note: **Theophánia** - "the appearance of God" - is the Greek name for the Feast of the Epiphany, January 6, which, since Greek Orthodox religious feasts still follow the Julian calendar, 12 days behind the Gregorian, is also celebrated by Greeks as the true Xmas. It is customary on that day for Orthodox priests to go out and, as described, bless all houses and places of business and their occupants. **Vassiliká** is a kind of basil, an herb regarded as holy in many countries, including Thailand.)

The photograph on the wall
of the apartment he and I took for one week
showed a young woman, laughing, defiant, preening
in the salt spray of the avenue, by the sea-wall.
And the fat grey lady sighed
and said to us in French "That once was me.
I was that young girl once. Look at me now."
Her face, a weathered map. Her thick waist, sagging.
Her businessman son was brusque and impatient
and clearly disapproved of the whole shady transaction
(no documents of identity, no contract)
but wouldn't interfere. After all, **fluss** was **fluss**.
So they moved out; Rifaat and I moved in.
We made love, smoked **afyun**; we did **our** thing.
Seawind was still cool, in that terrible country,
and the sky was blue and pure, in an impure world.
And the grey old woman, who knew very well
what we were, what we smoked and what we did,
came each day to make our beds (accepting the fiction
that we slept in separate beds), to clean the toilets,
sweep up the butts of bad Egyptian red,
and once cooked us a very memorable fish.
We two wheeled round the town,
through bar, bazaar and restaurant, went to the beaches,
saw Cavafy's house and Durrell's famous square
with its clicking palm trees, ate small clamlike molluscs
at Diamantakis' tavern by the trolley-stop.
And the week was over. It was time to go.
Then Sayyida Laila pressed a photograph on me
showing a young girl preening in the salt spray
by the sea-wall, with defiant, hopeful eyes,
and said "I want you to remember me."
I kissed her hand and paid my compliments
and was gone from her life. On our sad trek to the bus stop
(we were breaking up for good; Rifaat was broke,
and I was nearly so for the moment) I asked him
what the name "Laila" meant.
He told me. "Night. The beauty of the night."

(Note: The city is Alexandria, of course. Diamantakis' tavern, which still exists, and the square with the clicking palms, figure prominently in **The Alexandria Quartet**. **Afyun** is opium. **Fluss** is money. **Laila** is a favourite name for Muslim women.)

The Litany

The machine you cannot turn off is yourself.
The only mind you'll ever know's your own.
The only pain and hunger you'll succeed in
tasting are the pain and hunger you feel.
Your joys are yours alone: no other shares them.
A solitary black mountain emerges
from the blue, alien sea around it: you.
The only body you will ever fondle
and understand and love is your own body.
The only orgasm is your lonely spurting.
The only death you'll ever die's your own.

Of Cicadas and Cyprus

Cicadas
torment the island dawn
and tyrannise the day:
fanatic Levantine
poets and anchorites
fully content to spend
seventeen years underground
to emerge for one season
of ceaseless, senseless "song."
The baleful, lifelike shells
of their last metamorphosis,
latest step in their aspiration
to the condition of "music",
cling to each carob tree.
One can tell exactly
when that horror, sun,
has risen

- not by the pale, fierce
light,
- not by the furnace heat:
when the first buzzsaw frets
network of valium dreams
(of childhood, greenery, snow)
then one's day has begun.
(Terrible, vacuous
Cypriot tourist's day:
truly, to work is hard,
but not to work is harder
- a Cypriot proverb
Durrell, approvingly, quotes.)

Inveterate insomniac,
I recall night-barking
wild dogs of Trinidad;
chattering street-sparrows
of North Africa;
meaningless howl of monkeys
in the Brazilian jungle;
and here
find my sleepless nights
rhythmed,
dead days relentlessly clocked
by the insane, mechanical
click of cicadas.
No, nature's not peaceful
- not even quiet.

(Rule One: you can never
find the cicada,
not even when it's shrilling
one foot away.
Cicadas are dark green,
like guerrilleros,
they've learned, I guess,
to wear protective camouflage.)

Early travellers,
who opined ill of Cyprus
(almost unanimously),
complained not of cicadas,
but of the snakes and locusts,
of frogs croaking all night
in pestilential swamps.
The swamps have long been
drained and are bone-white
salt flats or high-rise
tourist flats,
though the small, sly,
hæmophile mosquito remains.

What have I to do with this?
Greek-Turkish-British island,
its hordes of mass tourists
flying, cicada-like,
from their cold northern
fields?
The all-night buzz of jets,
the all-night beat of disco,
soldiers and sailors, Arabs,
English expatriates,
beach hotels, condominiums,
nude bathing, sex movies,
babel of fifty tongues.
Only a small bar keeps
under its grape arbour
with its chorus of old men
something of what I loved.
What have I to do with this?
Useless walled, moated cities;
closed, violated mosques;
gray, phallic minarets
decking smoke-blackened
churches
full of old gold of ikons,

Of Cicadas and Cyprus (Cont.)

Crusader, Venetian forts,
Phoenician, Mycenean,
Roman, Byzantine temples?

Bragadino's straw-stuffed skin
kept in some church in Venice
(flayed alive by the Turks
after the year-long siege
of walled Famagusta where sixty
thousand died:
the starving ate dogs and
cats);
King Nicocreon burned
- last king of Salamis -
with all his family
in the flames of his palace
by Ptolemy of Egypt;
score-thousand townsmen killed
in 1570's siege
of Nicosia by the Turks;
Archbishop Kyprianou
with two hundred followers
hanged by suspicious Turks
in 1821;
this sleepy port from which
the Templar's last Grand Master
(rediscoverer, maybe
of the True Virgin's cult
- Ashtarte, Great Mother,
Venus - or of a male Venus?),
Jacques de Molay, set sail
to be burned at the stake;
the tower from which
Prince John of Antioch
tossed his Bulgarian troops
- suspected of dark designs -
into a dark abyss;
EOKA; Cyps and Brits;
young British soldiers killed;
"the Turk will get you yet"?

What have I to do with this?
Fossil dwarf hippo-bones
worshipped as saints' relics,
powdered, drunk by the
faithful;

the stone where mothers light
candles to Panaghía
Galatariótissa
- milk-giving Virgin, last
memory of the foam-born;
the mosque in a palm grove
where once the Prophet's aunt
fell from her mule and
"broke her pellucid neck,
...in that sweet spot was buried";
the woods where Adonis
was gored by the fatal boar;
it was here that Othello
murdered Desdemona
("Cypriot men by nature
are the most luxurious,
infamous through too much
heat");
King Richard Coeur de Lion
married Berengaria here,
then formed an "ardent
friendship"
with her brother, Sancho;
even Rimbaud was here,
contracted typhoid fever!

All that is history now,
and history's blood,
death, burden.
Your present's burden, too:
your "Attila line" of "peace";
ubiquitous soldiers now
(chatting up whores in bars)
in their cool UN green,
with "Your pass to go there?";
your refugees (forty percent
of the population) with tales,
nightmares, atrocities;
your bar-girls' lies, hibiscus-red tissues
of memory;
your young boys by the harbour,
their dreams of "getting out";
fish 'n' chips, true Brit
style,
served with too-sweet red
wine;

Of Cicadas and Cyprus (contd.)

small pickled migrant birds
crunched as a delicacy;
énosis (the coupling):
partition (parturition).

Far better to let you,
island of Aphrodite
(foam-born Panaghía,
her message still
undeciphered),
island of venery,
island of love, they say
(though love's also a ruin,
its voice shrill, mechanical,
like the chant of cicadas
or the dead beat of disco
in these the final days),
far better to let you
sink back into the foam
of your legends and ruins,
sink back into the ruin
of your meaningless, tragic,
quite untranscendental
hatreds and history
(and sundry histrionics).

Even better, forget you,
distant outpost of empire,

crossroad of barbarians
who knew little of love,
leave you shimmering, unreal
in the salt/heat mirages
rising from burnt golden plains
in the pale, distant visions
of chalk-white
and blue mountains
long since stripped bare
of pine trees.

The ship leaves the harbour
of the small deliquescent port;
leaves the boys
and the bar-girls
to their larcenies, dreams;
cuts the deeper blue water,
and faint wind blows fresher now. No,
I am no nisophile;

island's the primal prison;
goodbye, crossroads of history,
island of hate,
partitioned island of love;
fade away now behind me
forever and ever,
fade into the heat haze
of distant, pale mountains,
the enchantment of ruin
and the spell of your past.
I'll carry my memories, too, of too heavy
a weight of time, present too bleak to
bear,
food too strong, wine too
sweet,
tourists and refugees,
heat-haunted, sleepless nights,
carob trees, hibiscus,
bougainvillea's dry flare,
fierce sun and fiercer thirst,
and centuries punctuated
by the parched buzz
of your muse,
your chronicler, your poet
- history's mindless cicada!

Of Cicadas and Cyprus (contd.)

(Note: Since the pointlessness of history is the whole point of this poem, I'll not presume to annotate it exhaustively: most of the references and "quotes" are self-explanatory; many of them come from Ian Anderson's excellent though depressing **Blue Guide** and from Lawrence Durrell's **Bitter Lemons**. The poem is the fruit of a horrible month spent on a horrible island which, having lost my passport and the nearest Canadian embassies being located in Tel Aviv and Athens, I was unable to leave until the Greek Cypriot government kindly furnished me with a UN Stateless Persons' Refugee Document, with which I was able to enter Greece, and which I kept for a year [its term of validity]: it was so much more exotic than a pedestrian Canadian passport! Aphrodite was born from the sea foam at Paphos, in Cyprus; in her other aspects, as virgin goddess, Great Mother, etc. - Ashtarte Artemis-Diana, Isis, etc.- she was also worshipped at different times on the island and throughout the whole Middle East. **Panaghía** is the Virgin [Mary]. Bragadino was an Italian general who held out for the Venetians - who ruled Cyprus for many centuries, until the Turkish conquest - at Famagusta for a year, until 1571. Prince John of Antioch was one of the Lusignans, the Crusader kings who ruled the island - very badly - for several centuries before the Venetians. Haram, the Prophet's aunt, was in Cyprus in the seventh century, in one of the early Arab conquests of the island. The Order of Knights Templars was abolished by the papacy in 1812 because of suspicions of revival of pagan rites and/or homosexuality - actually, so that Philip the Fair of France could seize their immense wealth. Britain "leased" Cyprus from the collapsing Ottoman Empire in 1878. Enosis [union with Greece] was the goal of the anti-British, anti-Turk pro-independence terrorist movement that scourged the island in the 1950's. Cyprus is about 80% Greek, 20% Turkish, by population. The island was partitioned after the Turkish invasion of 1974, which followed an EOKA- and Greek-inspired coup against President Makarios; at present the Turks hold nearly 40% of the island and have set up an independent vassal state of Turkey there, while the Greek part of the island has become a mere appendage of Greece. There is no hope for reunification. The "Attila line", with a no-man's-land on either side of it, divides the island; the "Green Line" cuts the capital, Nicosia, in two. Both lines are patrolled by UN soldiers and all travel between the two zones is forbidden. Over 40% of the population, Greek and Turk, consists of refugees displaced from one of the two parts of the island to the other. **Nisophile** means "islandlover": Durrell somewhere divides humanity up into "nisophiles" and "nisophobes," a very intelligent differentiation. I suspect the "locust" early travellers complained of was in fact the cicada. The small migrant bird called **beccafico** visits Cyprus to eat its figs. The "port" is Limassol.)

Some Seeds From Pomegranates
(title borrowed and adapted from D.H. Lawrence)

I. Rough, unpromising
red-green shell breaks open
liberating
rutilant
translucent
bits and pieces
squares and triangles
- domino chips -
onto the rough wood
of the table.

Juice like pale blood
soon stains the table.

The jewel-box.
The garnet-apple.

II. Fruit of my childhood.
Only at Christmas
did I see the pomegranate,
small, subversive, hard,
smuggled into that cold
country that loves not
fruit.

Under the Christmas tree,
with tangerines and nuts,
I'd find **one** pomegranate.
And I'd savour
tearing it open
spilling its jewels out
eating them one by one
dreaming of the day
I'd live
where pomegranates grow.

III. To eat a pomegranate
pry the coy fruit
in half,
split the halves
into quarters
with pressure
of your hands;
use your fingers to scoop
the ruby grains out
into the cupped
right palm
(never, never
the left hand!),
then lift the hand

to mouth:
that way, no jewel is
lost.
I learned this trick
from living with Arabs,
for whom all waste is sin.

I must have let
some drop, like Persephone.
No, I remember now,
she fell because she ate
only six grains, six seeds:
Demeter's daughter
for six long months a year
queen of the shadows:
I had only two months,
inchallah, unrenewable.

IV. Flower that's never picked
from hedgerow or orchard,
for it must fecundate;
frilled, orange-coloured,
gross, vulgar, labiate
flower of the pomegranate.

V. Break open further
the reticent fruit
that guards its secret
so jealously:
bitter honeycomb
of red cells, disengaging,
reluctant, individual
- blood-covered teeth
from bilious gums
of sour yellow rind.

VI. Saladin
the courteous, the
munificent, brought ice
from the mountains of
Lebanon, served it with
crushed pomegranate
- thus inventing sherbet -

Some Seeds from Pomegranates (Cont.)

to his Christian captives,
the ones that were chosen
to be garrotted next day.

VII. Old Moorish city
in your shell
of hard mountains
jewel-box
of fragile art,
refinement,
and killing;
where men
murdered brothers,
harem wives
poisoned husbands,
to the perfume
of fountains
under stalactites and
arabesques
- you too were the
pomegranate!

VIII. Sanguinary fruit
colour of pale blood
sinister as blood orange
hiding your riches
the way Muslim women
hide their jewel,
their sex.

Splitting open at last,
answering nature's
imperative,
showing your shame to
all.

IX. Two pomegranates
on a café table,
the young hill-boy,
my friend,
sitting beside me:
strangers in that cold
town
- town by the seaside -
town of white houses
and white-sheeted women:
two travellers tasting

bittersweet fruits of
life,
tempting the gods,
no doubt,
gods of the underworld.
Each with his pomegranate,
peeling, graining, eating
the treacherous
bright seeds.
And a magic teapot, **berrat**,
on the table before us,
that, however much
we drank,
held as much tea as before.
That was where it all started:
the small earth-floored café.
We had just bought two
pomegranates as we strolled
through the market, and you
cannot eat pomegranates
while walking (just try it!).
The tea came because this
was a café, after all; that seemed,
in the circumstances, reasonable.
I recall robed, hooded men
sitting in rows by the wall,
watching with burning eyes
- red eyes of the pomegranate.

Night, catlike, settling down on that
town of white houses and white
women, silent men; distant sea
crashing;

Some Seeds from Pomegranates (Contd.)

then the **soubsis**, the **shishas**,
the hashish, the fellowship,
the conversation I scarcely, lost in my
thoughts, listened to.

And among the robed strangers, the
brigag, l'indicateur.

I do not remember who sat there,
smoking with us, remember only
burning eyes,
burning coals in the pipe - red as the
pomegranate -, disquietude, the
fear falling with night like dew, the
fruit long eaten now, the sense of
something coming due, a walk
through darkened streets
crowded with hooded strangers,
and something undefined
both behind and before,
something waiting to be:
heavy hand suddenly
on the nape of the neck,
arrest, search, prison cell
and two months underground.
I spit you out,
pomegranate,
bitter, astringent,
traitorous fruit!

X. Now
pomegranate has been eaten:
there remain only
rough bits of shell,
scattered
red square and triangles
recalling
inevitably
the garnet-apple
of faith (as of childhood)
the lost pristine unity
- union in diversity -
of the many-celled
one-fruited

blood-living Faith
- "the blood of martyrs -
is the seed of the
Church" - now long since broken,
opened, classified, scattered under
cold eyes of those who ate a
different apple:
pomegranate rejected.

Or is it the mystery,
the apple of sex, always
secret living jewel
at the heart of all action,
which our analytic age
has pried open, exposed,
demystified, ridiculed, eaten, and
tired of?

Finally, perhaps these fragments
may seem parts of a mosaic
set asunder, shattered, a jigsaw
puzzle forever unfinished,
glittering bits and pieces of
experience existence that I never
could relate one to another
never manage to make sense
of or fit into some pattern, and now
the jewelled apple is eaten
the table is swept clean and there
are no more patterns.

XI. And that uneaten fruit
of January, February,
wizened now, cold and hard,
swinging on bare winter
tree:

that pomegranate's me!

Some Seeds from Pomegranates (Cont.)

(Note: Really various poems in one, of course, under a unifying symbol: I don't know if it works. "Garnet-apple" is just a literal translation of the German name **Granatapfel**. **Inchallah** - "if God wills" - the universal expression of hope mingled with fatalism and resignation in the Muslim world. The story about Saladin is apocryphal and has also been told of various Turkish sultans. The "old Moorish city" is Granada, whose name means "pomegranate." The city of white houses by the sea is Mogador, or Es-Saouira, in Morocco, and this section - Section IX - is the story of how my friend Abdelfatteh and I fell in prison there. **Soubsi** is a Moroccan pipe for smoking hashish or **kif** - a mixture of black tobacco and hashish; **shishe** is a water-pipe [hookah] **berrat** is the Moroccan word for "teapot"; **brigag** is a police informer. The pomegranate is one of the frequently used early symbols of the Roman Catholic Church, representing "unity in diversity." "The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church" is a quotation very often used by RC theologians but I don't know who originated it. Parts of the second-last stanza ["Finally, perhaps"] are a paraphrase of a review by Dennis Lee of my first book of poems.)

SOME FLOWERS AND TREES

(another title from Lawrence, I think)

Scarlet Anemone

The wind-flower.
Eight tongues of fire stand guard around
the dark
unseeing
fertile
eye
(outlined sometimes in white).
Eight futile flames the spring wind soon extinguishes,
in a day or two, their purpose accomplished:
to lure the butterfly or bee
perpetuate the species
and depart.
Meaninglessness of beauty. Its gratuitousness.
In photographs I always took you for
vulgar poppies. So many things
I've never learned and now I'll never learn and see.
Two-thirds at least of life gone by, and I've waited
(in my country, there were so few flowers)
till this late spring, to know the anemone.
The scarlet wind-flower.
Small flower burning in the wind of time.

(Note: Scarlet anemones and wild poppies abound in Greece in the springtime.)

Oleanders

All summer long the bloom, on all these islands
(which must be their native home), growing like weeds
in meadows and dry riverbeds, lining the streets
of the small whitewashed towns, with their innocent odourless
clusters of cream-coloured or rosy blooms.
In Spain, where they spring up in álcázar and alhambra,
they are called **adelfas**, which may have something to do
with brother- or sisterhood. It is as well, though, to remember
that roots, stems, sap, leaves, flowers are poisonous,
that even the smoke curling from burning branches
will sicken children, and the honey from those blossoms
(even if gathered by the bees of Mount Hymettos)
can kill a man.

SOME FLOWERS AND TREES (contd.)

The Persimmon Tree

There you stood
in the winter sun,
crimson fruit,
dark frieze of boughs:
scarlet globes
of unspeakable sweetness
rotting, rotting
in that cold sun!

(Note: The bright red fruit of the persimmon tree, which looks rather like a tomato, and which can be eaten only when almost rotten - otherwise an acid in the fruit puckers the mouth unbearably - remains on the bough long after the leaves have fallen, sometimes all winter long.)

[Ed. Note: Ed never went to Japan, and it's a good thing he didn't, for with his peculiar, strong, misanthropic behavior he would have been a sore thumb par excellence. But **had** he gone he could have experienced the exquisitely rich and delicious dried persimmons of winter, which, hanging from the eaves of farmhouses, please the eye long before they touch the palate, with their darkening salmon-red hue. The next Japanese acquaintance you know who's going back -- cajole them into finding you some **hoshigaki**. You will not regret it.]

Wissaria

(read across; this **is** the correct spelling, incidentally)_

I. In the gold
morning light
pendulous
fragrant
languid pallor

in the white
fire of noon
your ghostly
mauve!
your etiolate
leaves!

in the cool
evening shadows
azure dust
on a blue wind

II. You are not grapes. You are the
apotheosis of grapes.
You are what grapes would be
if grapes could be flowers.

III. The same root as "wistful"?
Dubious. Your European name is
glycinia.
But your fragrance, paleness,
briefness are the root of
wistfulness.

SOME FLOWERS AND TREES (contd.)

Flowering Judas

Like cherry, but purpurean red,
strange as that inhuman blood shed
for us (some say), you blossom too
at Easter, for a luckless Jew,

who, knowing his Lord would rise once more
(first true believer), just tried to score
on the deal, and lost. Tough break. Enough:
after forty springs, I find going's rough,

and, little caring if I see
in a new spring, a new Judas tree,
I'd sell self, soul and a world of men,
sweet Christ, to have my youth again!

(Note: This of course is a parody of Housman's **Loveliest of Trees**. The Flowering Judas is a round-leafed, catalpa-like tree that produces, in Mediterranean countries, around Easter, a profusion of small red pea-like flowers, many of which grow directly from the trunk and branches.) (Its scientific name is **Cercis siliquastrum**, and it is supposedly the tree on which Judas hanged himself.)

Plane Trees: Provence

In every square you find them:
the scabby, leprous trunks, a few dry leaves
and desiccated balls of seed still clinging to the tips
of gnarled, knotted branches clawing at the sky
in agonised protest or rogation
like arthritic fingers.
They will be, moreover, the last of trees to bud
in spring. The tardy plane trees.
Why plant these monstrous emblems of deformity
where lovers meet, where children play, in the living soul
of the cities and peaceful villages?
But, heart, remember what they were last summer,
how they gave coolness, protection, delight to the eye,
when you sat pensive and the children gambolled
in their green shade.

On Definitions

And if they ask you, are you straight or gay?
Say "Boys, I'm stray."

(Note: This is not a flower or tree, evidently - perhaps a fruit.)

Acacia

The lobed leaves.
The massed white flowers,
small, like pea-blossoms,
white and scentless.

You were my favourite
flowering tree:
more than wild fire
of apple or chokecherry
than phallic May-candles
of the horse chestnut
more than even narcotic
arousal of lilac,
you meant that nature
had kept the old promise,
that the short, sweet summer
had finally come.

June or July.
Childhood and summer.
The bee-loud glade,
the honey-haunted.
A few brief months
of warmth and respite.
Scentless white blossoms
spilling upon me
falling like new snow,
wind-piled into snowdrifts,
blown like snow away.

I called you "locust"
in those days
when I was Canadian.

Now, years later,
once more I meet you
in another country,
with another name,
earlier, of course,
in May or April,
coming just after
exotic wisteria,
flowering Judas.

Scentless white blossoms,
tumbling in gutters,
wind-shaped like snowdrifts,
blowing unseen away
like yesterday's snow
yesterday's country.
But I have travelled
have seen blue jacaranda,
scarlet flamboyant,
the tulip tree,
gold and pink
of the **apamate**,
purple **quaresmeira**,
red **immortelle**.
Now your pale scentless
blossoms
are not for me, acacia,
I have seen
other colours
other countries
other flowers.

(Note: There are no proper English names for the trees of the **apamate** or **ipe** family. The **quaresmeira**, the Brazilian glorybush, blooms in Lent [quaresma]. The **immortelle** is a tall tree used to shade coffee and cacao bushes.)

Luscinia

In foliis luscinia interdum cantat.

"The nightingale meanwhile sings among the leaves."

How well remembered, that first sentence in
my Latin primer (when kids still studied Latin),
ringing its changes: **cantat luscinia interdum;**

luscinia (in foliis) cantat, merely proving
that any word order goes, in permissive Latin.

How well remembered, and how soon forgotten,
that useless knowledge, seeing I've never had to address
a nightingale by its Latin - or any - name.

But as I lie here, with the usual hangover,
in the usual post-tranquilliser daze,

surveying my pre-dawn world: lemon tree,
its small suns anchored firm, though leaves are dropping;
tangerines, scattered by last night's windstorm,

prone on the earth, rotting away to earth,
a liquid voice suddenly makes an assertion,
a statement, conveying what? Speaking of beauty?

Or perhaps merely where plump grubs are to be found?

Hangover burns off in a blaze of music

and **luscinia in foliis interdum** cantat: in the branches

- fixed forever by the grammar of a textbook -

chante le rossignol....

At St. Paul's Bay: Lindos: Rhodes

After the cliff-hanging, overrestored
Acropolis, dedicated to that goddess
of wisdom and of warfare; after the small
white town's candy houses (dazzling, and cloying),
the donkeys, cobblestones, tourist shops, pottery,
the theatre's rough-rock-hewn twenty-odd
tiers of seats, what relief to find the path
(almost untrodden, edges bright with spring flowers:
yellow shamrock, grape, hyacinth, wild poppy)
down to a tiny, crag-enclosed blue bay
where a cake-white church commemorates his arrival
- A.D. 51, from Ephesus and riot -
the tireless traveller, the man of Tarsus,
with a hard message that hard pagan world
(the echo of Matthew Arnold here is deliberate)
(Claudius would have been reigning, between Caligula
and Nero) whose soft graces we now emulate
might (except for the Stoics) have found puzzling: "It is better
to marry than to burn" (though in **what** fires
he as usual did not indicate).

The three young bodies
curve in the cockleshell of their beached boat,
shirts off, legs up, brown skins and faces bared
to the sun god: one half-turns, hungry
for female flesh and fruition, as I near them,
displays the ageless profile subjugate to reason
and both to a young man's will. He sees only
a greying tourist, turns back
to his sex book with his photo of crouching woman
being dogfucked by two men, regales his friends
with the text my imperfect Greek translates:
"And as the cunt-juice dripped down on their cocks,
lubricating them, they writhed, withdrew and shot
load after load of the hot milk of life
upon her steaming thighs." "They that are Christ's
have crucified their flesh with its passions and desire."
Neither way's mine. I reach blue neutral water
and dive.

Monemvassia

"The single exit." Of course he remembers it
(he was not drinking then, not even retsina):
the walk across the causeway, rounding the Rock;
the tiny cemetery; the oleanders
planted hopefully, hopelessly, against salt blue wind;
the little red-tiled town (forty inhabitants now)
where a Paleologos took refuge.
Renowned for Malmsey wine: a few grape arbours
and date palms, but no magic draught or phoenix now
will revive an old town of siege and storm,
of Greek, Byzantine, Frank, Turk, Venetian
- dead now, except to tourism. He remembers
the long climb to the fortress's ruined edifices:
five hundred? A thousand buildings? Difficult to say
any longer; huge slugs, black, shiny snails, small blue flowers
(nameless: born, anyhow, without a name);
cisterns, full of green water, treacherous at twilight;
a full moon rising across the Rock that night.

"The single exit."

The last Byzantine city to surrender
to the Turks, and the last to return.
He remembers the church, with its peeling, faded murals:
John the Baptist, head on platter; sleeping Virgin;
St. George and the Dragon; Pantokrátor
staring palely from above; then the sheer drop
- seven hundred feet or more - to a sandy, moonlit beach.
He looked over, could have jumped,
ended his long flirtation with destruction.
But the blue flowers, the sea wind, the springtime
and the Pantokrátor, perhaps, had saved him
for something else (though he couldn't guess what); he desisted,
climbed down the narrow path, recrossed the causeway,
ate a hearty meal in a taverna, with wine,
went "home" and watched the moon
climb high over the Rock. "The single exit."

Monemvassia (Cont.)

(Note: Monemvassia - I don't give the accentuation, because everybody I met seemed to accent it differently - means "the only entrance, exit, passage", since there was/is no way to reach it except across the narrow causeway. It is a gigantic Gibraltar-like rock set in the sea a couple of hundred meters off the extreme Southeast coast of the Peloponnesus and was, as described, a great fortified Byzantine city, the last to harbour representatives of the Byzantine empire, even after the fall of Constantinople; it thereafter remained in Venetian hands until 1540, when it was the last Venetian enclave on the Greek mainland to be handed over to the Turks. When Venice reconquered much of the Peloponnesus in the late seventeenth century, it was in turn the last Turkish redoubt to surrender to the Venetians. Practically impregnable, it underwent siege after siege [including a three-year Frankish siege] successfully. The Byzantines called it "the city God Himself protected." Malmsey wine, better known today as **madeira**, originally came, not from that Portuguese island, where its grape was later naturalised with great ease, but from Monemvassia.)

Wanderers Nachtlied: III

A road goes up a mountainside toward a valley,
up through olive and prickly pear it climbs,
crisscrossing the terraces.
And in that valley a village will be lying,
warm red roofs half-hidden in leaves of fig and pomegranate.
And in that village a woman is living and waiting;
She braids her dark hair with a single jasmine star.
She will hear this poem.
She will sing this song.
But she will never know me.

Krasí kai Paidí
(in modern Greek, "Wine and Boy")

Myself, I hold
a bottle of wine's the closest surrogate
for the desired young man, or any man.
But it's never the young man. No substitute
for him. That warmth, that body, that desire.
No substitute for these. But the cold tomb.

Abdelfatteh

You put your hand on my shoulder
and **n'aie pas peur** you said.
Hot windless night. We were watching
a street fight in Marrákech.
You smiled at me, young hill-boy
(who thought that you were twenty,
but you just might have been eighteen),
and you showed two broken teeth.
We drank tea on the corner,
where you taught me Arab letters,
and we ended up at the **hammam**,
where you rubbed me down and fucked me.
Then you told me your life story,
all about your mountain village,
how you once had been a student
but had fallen out with a teacher
(lost promise of your family),
and you'd been expelled and now
you slept nights in the cafés
and smoked kif all the hot day
and scoured the town for tourists.

I went with you to your village
in the mountains near Marrákech.
I saw the barren hillside
(though to you it was blooming).
I saw the **bordj** you lived in
with the stable underneath it
for the camels and the donkeys,
and the sheep, the goats, the turkeys.
I met your grave, stern father,
upright in his blue djellaba.
I drank tea and smoked kif there.
I met your other mother
(as you called your father's new wife).
And you washed my hands with water
poured from a silver pitcher
(the custom of the county),
and we slept on Berber carpets
that were woven by your sisters.

And so I came to trust you,
and so I took you travelling,
and then we fell in prison
in a town called Mogador.
And **n'aie pas peur** you told me,
maktoub, it was all written,

Abdelfatteh (Cont.)

but, **inchallah**, we'll get out,
though you yourself were frightened.

For two long months we rotted
in a prison by the seaside,
where the gulls laughed every morning,
and the muezzin wailed at daybreak,
as the key turned in the iron door,
and the lice and bedbugs ate us,
and we lived on beans and lentils,
and you sold the shoes I'd bought you
and the blue shirt you were wearing
to get more food from the kitchen
so that I could eat "European".
And at nights you slept beside me
(on the cold floor, rough wool blankets)
and you put your arms around me
to protect me from the others
(for there were forty others).

Days, we walked around in circles
in that courtyard with eight olive trees,
hand in hand, like all the others
(the custom of the country),
sat and listened to the imams
(though of course I understood nothing),
while the armed guards prowled the rooftops.

The last time that I saw you
was as I was leaving prison
and we kissed each other on both cheeks
(the custom of that country),
while my police escorts looked on,
and you grabbed my hand and told me
"Remember, I'm your brother,"
and I marched out of the doorway,
for I was being deported.

Now, back on your **douar**,
you send me Christmas cards and little letters
(decorated with calligraphy and flowers)
in your funny French, saying things like this:
Mon cher frère, si tu veux m'aider, aide-moi
à ce moment, n'importe de quelle chose,
de l'argent, si tu peux, ou des vêtements
anciens, ou une cartouche de cigarettes.
And I sometimes send you money,

Abdelfatteh (Cont.)

and I hope it makes you happy,
for I won't be going back there.

And I wander
from country to country, purposeful, purposeless,
but sometimes
even now
at night
in my hotel-room of dreams
I hear across the darkness **n'aie pas peur**
feel
the small protecting body close to mine,
warm arms around my waist, quick, quiet breath,
the hard cock pulsing, saying "Let me in",
brief spasm of union and separation.
Abd-el-Fatteh.
Servant
of the Open Door!

(Note: This is the only poem in this collection which has been previously published; it appeared in 1979 or '80 in **Gay Sunshine** magazine, then in 1981 or '82 in a Gay Sunshine Press Anthology, whose name I can't recall, and in 1983 in the **Penguin Anthology of Homosexual Verse**, edited by Dr. S. Coote, an execrable anthologist and translator and a literary pirate, who published in the aforementioned collection various poems and translations of mine, which had originally appeared in **GS** or **GS** anthologies, without asking either my permission or that of **GS** and without paying either **GS** or me, to the moment, one cent in either rights or royalties. I include the poem here because it "belongs with" and dates from the time of others in this group. **Hammam** is a Turkish bath. **Bordj** is a fortified adobe house-castle, of a type common in Southern Moroccan villages. **Douar** is a country village. Marrákech is stressed as indicated. **Mogador** is the Moroccan version of the Arab robe. **Kif** is a mixture of black tobacco [tabac noir] and hashish smoked in pipes in cafés, commonly; it gives an almost immediate but not very enduring high. **Maktoub** means "it was written [by fate]". **Inchallah** mean the same, "Servant of Allah." The second part of the name is one of the 99 names, or attributes, of God. "**El Fatteh**" is a most difficult concept to translate, and is usually translated "the open door" [I'm of course punning most blasphemously on it here] but actually means something more like "the enlightened, illuminated or comprehending way, or path, or mind." [I.e.. that of God.] We actually won the case, though not before I had spent as much time in prison as my original two-month sentence had specified - in two prisons, that of Es-Saouira and that of Marrákech; I have blended the features of both in the description of the prison and of prison life as it appears in this poem.)

Words

I

In travelling, pilgrim, through North Africa,
there are only two words it is really necessary to remember:

sex and **fluss**.

You know the first one already, and I rather imagine
you've subtly surmised the meaning of the second.
it's like its sound: it suggests something fluid,
loose, useful, a rushing river of riches.

And when the hard brown boys, from Casablanca to Cairo,
approach you offering "friendship", you may be sure
that sooner or later **sex** will make its appearance
accompanied by **fluss**.

Sometimes one will come first. Sometimes the other.

That will not be, at any rate, your problem.

(**Your** problem is that of travelling alone
and thus being fair game - for any hunter.

"If you want to avoid propositions from North Africans,
take a woman companion with you, and offer her
to every man you meet.")

Of course, it's nice to know how to say - and give - **baksheesh**,
and "How much?", which, varying with dialect,
may be "sh-hal" or "kaâm" or even "qaddesh,"
and "fakka", which is "change" (and not what you thought it was,
though they know **that** word too),
and "please" and "thank you" which are both **baraka-allahu-fik**,
and **inchallah**, which means "if God wills," as He usually doesn't.
But the operative pair are **sex** and **fluss**.

And as you travel and listen, in bus and bazaar,
you will hear the people incessantly talking of **fluss**
that they possess, earned, lost, paid, stole or haven't got.
And you know, of course they obsessively think of **sex**
because you do yourself.

And when you have completed your pilgrimage, traveller,
and visited the great mosques from Fez to Cairo,
Kairouan, Tunis, Algiers,
you will have learned life's one essential lesson
(Islam is, after all, the merchant's religion),
that **sex** is **fluss**, and **fluss**, **sex**, that is all
ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

(Note: **Fluss** is pronounced [f(i)lúws], like the German word for "river." The poem incorporates words from the various, often mutually unintelligible dialects of spoken North African Arabic. **Baraka-allahu-fik** ["may the grace, good luck of Allah go with you"] is, for example, used only in Morocco and parts of Algeria and **baksheesh**, a Persian word, only in Egypt and from the east to India.)

Words

II

To survive and grow fat, friend, in Morocco's blithe prisons (which, unlike those of Mexico, do at least give you soul food - and plenty of hashish), you must learn, eager student, the appropriate vocabulary. Listen:

Aâdes is lentils
(Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays),
and **lûbya**, the kidney bean
(on Tuesdays and Saturdays);
Couscous comes at least
twice a week
(I guess Thursdays and Sundays),
and once a week **serdîn**
(donated by some God-fearing
factory owner from Safi).
Serdîn cans are collected,
naturally, after eating
(one might forge them into
weapons for fighting,
or fleeing),
And one eats out of buckets
- ah, chic cutlery of fingers -
but, then, that's the custom
of so many lands, lad,
You might as well get use to it.

Now the right word for bread's
khobz, but all prison bakeries
make a proud, special,
toothbreaking kind
called **bedonseh**.
(I remember it fondly
from five days spent slimming on it -
Morocco's wonder diet -
in the Mogador jail cell:
they were slow in transferring
us **hashishi** to prison.)

Well, the **chai** in the morning
tasted always of dishwater,
but the **couscous** was buttery,
and I'd always liked **aâdes**.
And the forty poor devils
who were cooped up there with me
helped with protein and
vitamins, shared their almonds,
dates, olives, and their
tangerines with me.
(And the **romman**, or pomegranate,
but I, like Persephone,
had a very good reason
for avoiding the pomegranate.)

Yet the days I enjoyed most
were the days we shelled **fûl** beans,
that were later transmuted
in gourmet prison kitchens
into thick, yellow, rich potage
like Canadian pea soup,
and they were called **besáara**.
It was truly delicious,
protein-rich and nutritious,
but I never could eat it,
no, I never could stomach it,
for, from shelling the
broadbeans,
I'd learned each bean harboured
(deep in Cnossian labyrinths)
at least two small white lively grubs
- type no doubt universal -
that the natives called **dûd**,
I think, and the Spanish,
gorgojos.

(Note: **Serdîn** is sardine. Safi is a
large Moroccan Atlantic
fishing-port.

Hashishi is a user of hashish. **Chai**
is, as usual, tea.)

L'Ancien Combattant

He had fought
with the French
in Algeria
Vietnam
the Congo
Laos
Kampuchea.
His old eyes
had seen strange suns
and stranger things
beneath the sun
had seen
too much
in too many countries.

Now long since
back on the **bled**
on his small farm
thrown into prison
at the age of seventy
over some obscure absurd
property quarrel
l'ancien
combattant
lorded it only
over an army of lice
which he persistently despatched
with apparent orders
to reconnoitre
all of us, his neighbours.

Besides these he shared
all else he had with us
his tea
army cigarettes
tangerines
and would say to me
seeing my dejection
in a low sad luring
singsong voice:
mais
prenez un petit beu
m'sieu
prenez un petit beu.

And when I asked him
about his experiences
about all that lifetime
of wandering
seeing
fighting
killing
his only answer
was always to say to me
in the same sad
singsong voice:
la guerre
elle n'est pas bonne
m'sieu
non non
elle n'est pas bonne.

(Note: All dialects of Arabic share the lack of the voiceless bilabial stop /p/.)

Mogador

I. And as our ship
clove the blue fire
and you came into view
burnt pastures
rocky headlands
dash of spray
your whitewashed, simple
houses, Mykonos.
I remembered
Mogador.

II. So little remains.
Scream of sea gulls
at dawn; dash of waves against
the stone walls of the **skala**;
sea urchins purple and spiny
on the porcelain plate for breakfast
(we ate twenty-four of them he and I);
umbrella pines;
and there were no flowers
(even in November);
and the white houses
white **haik**-clad women
one-eyed peeping Cyclopes
of Mogador.

III. When the bus let me off
in high Arcadian pastures near
Phygalia I heard them:
softly tintinnabulating
sheep bells from a hundred
mist-hidden pastures
and I remembered
the two French church bells
that marked the quarters
and tolled the hours
one always sixty seconds
behind the other
as we lay
for five days
on bread and water
on the stone floor
of that jail cell
in Mogador.

IV. And so I went down
to the very bottom

stayed there a while
and came back - apparently.
(Mexicans say to know a city or
country you must know its jails
and its red-light districts.)
And of the lessons I learned there
which were the important ones?
Comradeship (never so closely felt
since long lost boyhood days)?
Discretion? Fear? Lack of fear?
Fidelity? Distrust?
No, I think especially I now know three
new things:
how to shell **fûl** beans
and to remove the grubs;
that it is fun - also delicious -
to crack small body lice
between one's teeth;
and that it is warm
and very human
to sleep with forty-five other men
in a room measuring five metres by
five.

Mogador (Cont.)

(Note: These are again, all these prison poems, merely fragments of a long poem that will now never be written. The **skala** is a fortified sea wall and castle that protects Mogador. The **haik** is a white, shroudlike garment worn by North African women in some areas; it is drawn almost completely over the body and face, leaving only one eye visible. Phygalia is a town in the Peloponnesus, Greece.)

Málaga

The city lies
just south of winter
and is almost tropical.
Craggy snow mountains shield it from the north winds
(yet remind one that snow, like death, is always present),
and Africa is only a few miles away.
The district produces, among other things,
persimmons, avocados, sugar cane,
chirimoyas (called sweetsops or sugar apples
in the West Indies)
and a particular kind of sweet green grape
which has spread its name and fame to the rest of the world.
The muscatel wine, also called Málaga,
is superb, as is the sacramental kind
(Lachrymae Christi) which fat priests and vicars slurp at mass
all over Christendom. Its dark, barrel-filled bodegas
(serving snacks of shrimp, mussel and strange types of clams)
are reputedly
the best in Spain. "Town
of a thousand bodegas and one bookstore,"
sneered Picasso, a native.
A Moorish fortress crowns a wild hilltop. Beneath it,
a museum, a Roman theater, broken Greek statues,
Phoenician jars and coins. This was where Boabdil
stopped and wept for Granada, the beautiful,
the lost, then sailed for Africa.
Afternoons in winter, the sun tells its lies,
and the old Nordic pensioners creep out
to doze in parks till the evening chill descends,
as it always does, at five.
And at night, if you walk along the palm-fringed paseos
(where dark Moroccan boys cruise the rich tourists),
you might almost believe you're back in - say - Brazil.
Exotic enough, I suppose, for the frigid Germans
who throng its gay bars and the Scandinavian restaurants
of Torremolinos. But I remember a country,
a **real** country, only a few miles away,
where men wear brown wool robes and ride on donkeys,
and women are veiled, and the boys fuck on hillsides,
and the muezzin wails five times a day to God,
and you lie and die in jail as **gmel** and **baq** eat you.
El Maghreb el Aqsa.
Land
of the Morning Star....

Málaga (contd.)

(Note: Picasso was born in Málaga, though he seems to have disliked it enough never to have returned after his departure to study in Barcelona: the city conserves not a memento of him. Boabdil was the last Moorish king of Granada. Málaga was supposedly founded by Phoenicians and was an early and important Greek and then Roman and Arab port. "El Maghreb el Aqsa" simply means "the Far West", as North Africa is called "the west" in Arabic. "Land of the Morning Star" was the Roman term for Morocco. **Gmel** - "lice". **Baq** - "bedbug".) (Málaga is, of course, a little more than "a few miles" from Morocco. I compare its features here with those of Algéarass.)

Ceuta

Strange town. Strange Spanish excrescence on Africa,
growing out of the Middle Ages, a Portuguese dowry,
yet logical, as well. Spain **is** Morocco,
and Morocco, Spain. (**That** no Spaniard or Moroccan
will ever tell you; but twelve hundred years
of intertwined history breed entangled hearts
that pulse to a common rhythm, beating when the other
beats, bleeding when the twin
bleeds.) Anyhow, on to the tour. Not much to see here.
The town's really just a **presidio**,
a prison (for its own inhabitants). Streets lined with lanterns
of the tangerine. (From Tangier, naturally). You can climb the mountain (Monte
Hacho, one of the Pillars of Hercules); you can visit the church
where Francisco Franco prayed, in '36,
before invading his country (**was** he Spanish?) and killing
a couple of millions of his countrymen.
(Francisco Franco, at the age of eighty,
still lord and dictator of a nation, ready
to order the death by garrotting of an anarchist.
Now? Hash, fuck shows, porno movies, all over Spain.)
Yes, you can visit Our Lady of Africa
(familiar, breast-like blue dome, rearing from blue water),
you can visit your last Spanish bars, drink **jerez**, eat your last **tapas**, as 1400.
No longer 1980.
For make no mistake. You are changing your world now, traveller.
(Bowles and Capote had warned you, after all, or tried.)
This is not just a shift of cultures. A slip of language
you try on, then discard again for another.
You are entering the Middle Ages. The world of the Malek.
1980 will seem more and more distant
as you penetrate the unknown continent, Islam, encounter
the hatred, the battle, the frontiers of the mind.
Farewell, Ceuta's blue sea, Spanish bars, fragile Europeanism,
Adiós, adiós, Nuestra Señora de Africa.

Ceuta (contd.)

(Note: Ceuta is a Spanish **presidio** - "a garrisoned fort, or fortified military prison" - opposite Gibraltar - the other one of the Pillars of Hercules - an enclave on the extreme northern tip of Morocco, measuring about 15 sq. km. It has been Spanish since 1520, and Spain has a secret agreement with Morocco not to return it or Melilla, a similar enclave further east, near the Algerian border, until England gives Gibraltar back to Spain. It is the existence of Ceuta that enables the Spanish to "throttle" Gibraltar so effectively. Most of the 100,000 inhabitants are Moroccans, who come and go freely between their country and the enclave and may work there without Spanish papers: it is, in fact, the starting-point for most of the illegal Moroccan immigration into Spain and thence France, since inhabitants are legally entitled to migrate to the Spanish mainland and cannot be "controlled" by immigration. The mandarin orange migrated from China by way of the Arab world and finally Morocco to Europe, and hence was given in English the name that designates the inhabitants of the former free city of Tangier. Franco declared his rebellion against the Republican government in 1936 from the Canary Islands and invaded the country from Ceuta with a largely Moroccan armed force [all northern Morocco was at that time a Spanish protectorate, while France ruled the larger southern sector]; Moroccan soldiers were, at all times during his dictatorship, his favourites, and formed his personal guard; the Moroccans' attitude to Franco was similarly friendly and, in personal terms, often adoring, since he had been a military commander in "Spanish Morocco" for years before assuming power. Rumours have always circulated in Spain that Franco himself was of Jewish or "Moorish" descent. **Tapas** are Spanish bar snacks. **Malek** is the title in Arabic of the king, or sultan, of Morocco, an absolute religious and temporal ruler. The references in line 27 are to the two marvellous African novels of Paul Bowles, **The Sheltering Sky** and **Let It Come Down**. I consider Bowles one of the most important fiction writers of the 20th century, despite his limited output - and to a remark made or written somewhere by Truman Capote: "When you decide to go to Morocco, set your affairs in order; liquidate your bank accounts; and say goodbye to your friends - because you won't be seeing them for a long, long time.")

Coari

It seems so distant now, in time and place,
and it is, that small town on the Amazon
where our ship stopped for one hour, New Year's Day.
The sheen of vegetation, milk-blue water,
little punts paddling out, full of **pupunhas**,
oranges and **tucumas** for us to buy,
and one entirely filled by a great red **pirarucú** fish,
eight feet long, served at all our meals for the rest of the trip.
It seems so far away, yet there was a time
when that was my world. Now, a world away,
I remember the three **grandes** dames of the Amazon.
(They were army captains' wives and with their husbands
occupied the three cabins; the rest of us slept in hammocks
on deck - far cooler, and pleasanter as well;
and every night Frederico, young Portuguese,
a refugee, and nineteen, and beautiful.)
I recall the **grandes dames** quarrelled bitterly with their husbands
over what to wear for our **sortie** on shore, and one ended in pique
not going. Me, I decided to visit the bars
and case the boys. There was only one street,
and exactly one car, just imported by someone,
which was twenty years old or so, and roared at all of
twenty miles an hour, up and down the six
or eight blocks, giving rides to the local kids.
The **cachaca** was not good. There was no coca-cola.
So long ago. So trivial. Yet I guess every place
teaches you something, leaves its mark on you somehow.
For I walked a bit out of town - it had been raining,
and the foliage glowed with that unnatural green
of afterrain. And I came on a field filled with dozens of vultures
extending their white-tipped wings to dry in the sun.
I had never heard of this particular habit of vultures
(though doubtless it's well enough known to ornithologists).
I was suitably amazed. And I had no camera.
No one has ever written a poem about you, **coari**,
and most probably no one will ever do so again,
but like Colonel Buendía, at the hour of my end I'll remember a glowing green field
with palm trees and jet-black, white-tipped vultures stretching their wings out to
dry in the Amazon sun....

(Note: This is a distant reminiscence from a trip up the Amazon, from Manaus to Leticia, Colombia, by **gaiola** - the name means "cage"; the local Amazon steamboat used for transport of goods and passengers - at the end of 1976, my final departure from Brazil. **Pupunhas** and **tucumas** are types of palm fruit. The **pirarucú** is the world's largest river fish. **Cachaca** is cheap Brazilian white rum. The reference to Colonel Buendía, is the beginning of García Márquez's **Cien Años de Soledad**, in which Colonel Aurelio Buendía, about to be shot by a firing squad, remembers the day in his boyhood when his father took him to see ice, for the first time in the history of his village.)

Doña Aurelia

Doña Aurelia, viuda de López.
Ugly fat old witch-woman with iron-grey hair,
warts on your cheeks, and iron-clad principles
(which, nevertheless, bent to curing my hangovers
with shrimp broth, and permitting me to bring boys
to my room at any reasonably discreet hour.) For three years
I lived in that room; burnt rubbing alcohol
on the blue mosaic floor, for warmth, in winter;
I pissed in the chamber pot (emptied daily by Petra);
and my two pet iguanas clung to the barred window's screen
(attracting unwanted audiences of **campesinos**
with their straw hats sandals and black staring eyes);
and climbed the fig-tree in the second patio;
and drank the running water I poured for them.
(Iguanas are individualists, as Tennessee Williams
well knew; they will drink only **running** water.
Still water just won't do. Iguanian **mores**.)
That complex house had two patios: the back one
(with its great silver fig-tree, and a pomegranate bush;
there Chevo and Lupe lived in their small room),
and the front one, in which your green fingers, Aurelia,
had worked a magic in that desert city
where it never rained. **Everything** that blossomed grew there
in an impenetrable, morning-glory, oleander.
Between the patios, the dark rooms, out of bounds to me,
where you slept your deathlike noonday sleep. To one side,
the apartment of Fernando and Alfonso.
(Two young bachelor brothers, fellow roomers: NOTE)
The boiler. The toilet. The shower. The sombre parlour
with its portraits, wicker rocking chairs, and the TV set
that was never looked at. Facing it, **my** room,
its blue-tile floor, pastel blue walls, high ceiling,
huge bed that creaked "chaca chaca" whenever I fucked.
(I can still hear that puritan protest - "chaca chaca."
Leobardo, José, Rafael slept in that bed
on many a winter night, while the iguanas
crept and glid, prescient silence. But why remember?
Past is **not** prologue. Memory's the pain.)
Anyhow, I always paid my rent, Aurelia,
and you always respected me, called me "profesor,"
and once a month you sailed out on mysterious missions
of money-collection. Evil tongues (which were never lacking
in that dusty town) clacked that you were the secret owner
of a string of brothels all over North Mexico.
There was even talk of murders and abortions
and cemeteries full of children's mummies
in your home town, Guanajuato. You had two sisters,

Doña Aurelia (Cont.)

iron-grey, iron-clad, like you; twice a year they came to visit you. Your late, unlamented husband was a **cantinero**, proprietor of the Bar Verde: doctors had told him to stop drinking; he'd stopped for eight long years, then resumed it, and died in a few weeks. Your fat and graceless daughter, Blanquita, was also rumoured to be the offspring of a servant (Petra?), sired by your revered husband. But I doubt the story. She looked too much like you.

I went back to visit the house, Doña Aurelia, years later, after you'd died. They'd cut down the fig-tree. And Blanquita (who must really have hated you) had uprooted all the vines and flowers you'd grown in the patio, which lay bald, barren, under the desert sun. All magic gone. Memory's the pain. And the solace. Ugly old woman, witch and fairy godmother, as in fables. You tried to protect me against myself. I reckon that's about all anyone can do. Now I realise, for you I was some kind of strange plant. An exotic flower that had to be nourished, protected. You nurtured me. Goodbye, green fingers.

(Note: This poem is, of course, strictly autobiographical. "Doña" is simply a title of respect used with older women's first names, when addressing them or speaking of them. "Viuda de López" [the late husband's surname], is the usual formula adopted by Mexican widows. Shrimp broth is a standard noontime free lunch drink in all Mexican bars and is famed as a hangover cure [highly peppered, lemoned and salted, and full of protein, it works]. The burning of rubbing alcohol for warmth in winter, though it is, or was, an inexpensive method of heating the room - rubbing alcohol at that time cost less than one US dollar a litre - and though the resulting low blue flame will not set anything much afire, was one of my idiosyncrasies; I do not really recommend it for those living in subtropical climates. **Campesino** = "peasant farmer". **Cantinero** = "bar owner" or "barman." Iguanas are dragonlike but harmless vegetarian lizards, black or green in colour, from 2 to 6 feet long, native to Central America and Southern Mexico; they were unknown in desert northern Mexico hence the peasant spectators. They eat almost nothing, but do not thrive in captivity and are not very suitable pets. The seal is that of the city of Guanajuato, in Central Mexico.)

Khámsin

The khámsin wind
is blowing over Cairo, like hot snow,
blowing just as it used to blow in Torreón
long, long ago, where they called it **tolvanera**,
and the salt cedars sighed, and people ran
back to brown clay-brick houses to close
whatever could be closed - doors, windows, any orifice
where dust might enter
(as though we weren't dust ourselves, anyway).
Useless. It sifted in, soundless, somehow,
and you found it in your hair, your food, your bed,
as you made love you would feel it imperceptibly gritting
on the ass of the beloved. Those were the hours
when I walked around town, for it brought memories of snowstorms,
and the streets were pallid and empty, and it's pleasant
to stroll the avenue of a deserted city
whence all but you have fled, especially if it's adobe,
that is, itself made essentially of dust.
Like Cairo.
But the streets of Cairo are, alas, never empty.
Even at three a.m. you can rise up, stranger,
from the rack of your insomnia, walk by the Nile,
and find a nubile body. That's the problem.
There is always **someone**. There are **too many** bodies
and at least five sexes, as Durrell already noted.
And so today the khámsin wind is blowing
- hot breath of the Sáhara (which begins at the sepulchral
limits of the city), wind of djinns -
coating with its grey persistence the shining
hopeful young leaves of mango, grape and laurel.
I sit, refugee from the perturbing intruder
(at last, a wind as neurotic as I am!),
in a small, pseudo-French restaurant I've discovered,
which has excellent **cervelle dorée, baba au rhum**,
and a quite acceptable Egyptian white.
I read the **Herald Tribune**. Yet something's wrong.
The khámsin wind may blow for fifty days
or fifty years. Fifty centuries. The French restaurant
is a fortress, a prison. Is, like me, a fiction.
Outside, the beggars watch, with their blind eyes,
outstretched, fly-covered hands. Hard penises
and felukka rides on the milky, muddy river
are waiting for me
and
the khámsin
howls....

Khámsin (contd.)

(Note: The **khámsin** [pronounced [xámsin]] is a hot, dust-laden desert wind which blows in Northern Egypt during the winter months. Cairo is a long, very narrow city, bisected by the Nile, expanding only north and south, with the desert to the east and west. On the east it is ringed by cemeteries - called "cities of the dead" - of houselike Turkish- and Arab-style mausolea, in which thousands of homeless families have established themselves. Beyond lie desert mountains. To the west of the city are the Sphinx and the Pyramids. Torreón, a desert city in north-central Mexico, is the setting also of the previous poem, "Doña Aurelia." The **felukka** is a Nile sailboat.)

Vigil

The city is still sleeping. Only I am awake
and a few of the unbearable chirping birds of Africa
that talk all day of food.
Soon klaxons and the shriek of the street vendor
will begin. But not yet. The muezzin has not called.
I am immobilised in a kind of peace
that is not sleep or waking. I dream of snow,
dead relatives, green fields and baroque churches.
The city has no colour now, no shape,
only shadow and pyramids and river.
And people
Twelve million sleeping men, women and children.
But if I had to give the unprotected, nocturnal
necropolis a patron, it should be
the alabaster sphinx
that sits in a grove of palms at Saqqara,
face half eaten away. If you go there
when the moon is high, and the palms are whorls of darkness,
you'll see the sphinx shining white, its one eye open.
The sphinx sees, The sphinx watches. The sphinx knows.

(Note: The sphinx of Saqqara, to the south of Cairo, is **not** the sphinx of the Pyramids. The last line is an evocation of Lamont Tilden's popular radio mystery program of the 40's, "The Shadow," and it's "Only the Shadow knows.")

Café "To Neon"

Try to recapture
them as they once were
when they were yóungmen.

(Same green baize table
where mottled hands shuffle
greased, battered card-pack.)

Pass time's sponge lightly
over those age-marks.
Tighten the pouched skin.

Dye the sparse hair black.
Straighten the bent necks.
Still the hands trembling

(clutching their shot-glasses
- cold fire of old men -
clutching their memories).

pull up the corners
of smiles that turned earthward
with knowledge of gravity.

Banish, vanish those wrinkles,
plastic surgeon of transience,
brighten the dull eyes

(staring so sadly
into a distance that
no longer is distance).

Give me four young blades sitting
at life's cafe table,
joking, planning their long day.

Stiff cocks sharp as knife-blades, girls,
money, fame waiting, the card-game
just starting.

All time before them,
cutting, shuffling the card-pack, sure
players, born winners.

Condemning the old men
just like all the young bloods
who now sit around them

watching bright-eyed through
doorways the girls;
planning, plotting;
beginning their card-game.

(Now **these** watch musing
the passage of everything
- girls, time, yóungmen, card-game.)

And above all, remember,
this is where they are headed,
to this table at game's end
(and the sad thing,
they know it)
- all, all the yóungmen.

(Note: Most Greek towns have a café called "To Neon" - "The New" - which is on some contra square or corner, and is patronised by everyone, as a sort of town meeting-place, but especially by old men [missing section]. "Youngmen" is intentionally a reminiscence of John Rechy's **City of Night**.)

Ruth

Outside, blue snowflakes fall over the city.
She is reading a book about pain, or the problem of evil,
in her living room, surrounded by plants and mementos
of an exile's life. Paintings. Picture books, delicate small cups
from Danzig. A spinet. Bach on the record player.
And, of course, chocolates. And seven kinds of tea.
She is thinking about her pain. Or the pain of living.
These have found a path through the sad/glad heart of Ruth.
Lately, her arthritis seems to be improving
or "burning itself out", as the doctor promised.
But Montréal winter is neither place nor time
for arthritics. Or for anyone, in fact.
Soon she'll go visit Monique, who'll be meditating,
cross-legged, in the blue room, small-boned French face
relaxed of tensions, in complete distance from feeling.
If the snow has stopped, they may walk a while in the park
across the street, and then go in a taxi
(they are European ladies and like taking taxis)
to a dinner-date with their three impossible,
delightful daughters (one German-Canadian,
one Trinidadian, and one vegetarian)
in that small Hungarian restaurant, where they'll eat
stuffed cabbage rolls with sour cream, and ludlab cake.
Then back home with Monique for tea. Monique at last leaves.
And Ruth returns to the problems of pain and evil.
It is night. She is tired. She will swallow a couple of aspirins,
turn the heat down and struggle upstairs to bed,
to that soft Germanic bed of quilts and bolsters,
one of her few luxuries: then she'll slowly sink
into sleep and wonderful absence. The absence from being.

Break-Up

I will forget each word you said,
letter you wrote, the gesture, smile
that gilded every act with guile:
you are not living, you are not dead.

I will forget the wind-pale hair,
those years, December violets,
forget-me-nots that time forgets,
all that you had, all that you were,

all that you seemed, now to others seem,
buried in time's unsleeping sleep;
the few poor memories that I'll keep:
bright borne in a darkening stream.

Post-Liberated Prufrock

Beautiful boys within my reach
at every bus-stop, bar, bath, beach,
but - do I still want to eat that peach?

They

They are not the four
around me as I write this
or you as you read it.
We can walk out, leaving these behind.
And even if we cannot,
these are not they.

They are not that door, real or metaphorical,
which clanged shut on you a minute or
a life ago.

They are not borders, solid or broken
lines, colours on a map,
boundaries and embassies,
visas, passports, permits, fences, no-trespassing signs.

And they are not money, banks, travellers cheques,
the remittance that you have so long been waiting for,
the paycheque at the dwindling end of each month.

They are not even
doctrines and systems, laws, religions, parties,
ideas, ideals, ideologies.

They are not
the blue dust, sky,
the mist called cloud
the light called day
the star-haunted black emptiness
called night
for those
you will never touch.

Some call them
birth, growth, aging, sickness, death,
your circumstance, your work, your place, your time.
But those are not their name.

Their name
is not even a name.
They are this face
the skull beneath it
the skeleton within arms, legs and torso
this cage of ribs
that holds
the fluttering heart
these hollows where the eyes

They (Cont.)

stare out
in horror
or in wonder
the ridge
behind which the lonely brain
burns in its desperate vigil.

They are this body
and that brain itself
that hold you
and - terriblest of judgments, lifetime, prisoner -
prevent you
from feeling what another / creature feels
from knowing what another / creature thinks
from being anyone / except yourself.

Hmaar

I like the name.

It suggests one of those ancient Egyptian deities
on the order of Thoth or Khnoum or Ptah or Hathor,
but, alas, the word means only "donkey"
(which unlike the cat, the cow, the loathsome jackal,
was never, in any religion, even a demi-god),
and in Arabic, still today, it's an affront.

"Stupid. Stubborn. Licentious." The worst insult.

"The tattered outlaw of the earth," Chesterton called you,
linking you up, in his mediæval way,
with Jesus' triumphal ride to Jerusalem
- to doom, immortality, institutionalisation.

Ignatius of Loyola opined of you:

"Content with the simplest food, he does not even
comprehend his own wretchedness. Pity the donkey."

Juan Ramón Jiménez and Robert Louis Stevenson
liked and understood you quite unsentimentally.

Lawrence tried, more facetiously and fallaciously,
to interpret your bay

(which, scientists aver, no zoologist yet
has quite been able to predict, or construe),
that drugged lament, dragged from impassiveness,
unexpected, unheralded, without sequel,
almost as though unwilling, strange, mounting cry
(just as suddenly stilled) against the pain of living.
(And then you go on living, doubly dumb.)

All over Cairo

one sees the wooden donkey carts, which collect garbage.
They are always driven by three brown fly-blown children,
sitting on piles of ordure,
applying the switches, shouting words of command;
and, pulling them, there are always three tired donkeys.
These trinities are ordained for religious reasons
(or æsthetic ones, or belief in the magic of numbers)
which a higher power no doubt comprehends, but I do not.
Also, one of the donkeys is usually grey,
one white, and one is brown, with whitish nostrils.
Moreover, the outer two always seem to be male
and the middle one female; this is perhaps for companionship,
and as a reward, and a stimulus to work.

For work, you do.

That's all you do, in every corner of the earth,
in Latin America, North Africa, the Near East,
you work, for man.

The original slave, the primal prisoner, the first downtrodden,

Hmaar (contd.)

oppressed employee and exploitee. The worker.
Are there, were there ever any free wild donkeys?
No, no. We humanoids seem to have invented you
(as we did the dog, to flatter and bootlick us)
to be our slave, our robot.
It is true we do not eat you, at least. The Koran forbids it,
and probably the Bible too, but I suspect Belgians
may transgress even that rule. Though one doesn't generally
eat slaves. They're far too useful, and expensive.
But the wounds you bear from us are raw and open.
We work you till you die of malnutrition,
cardiac arrest, maltreatment, lack of love.
One day I saw a cart with four dead donkeys
- on their way to the glue factory for transmutation -
pulled by a living one: the dead at least
looked tranquil in repose; the living screwed up
its grim, sarcastic face in reproof. And plodded on.
On the muddy Nile and its green canals dead donkeys
float continually downstream, bright red wounds crawling
with flies and worms, bellies shining in the sun.
What did they die of? Ask the god of donkeys
if such exists. If his name is not "man."
Anyhow, the UN has never taken your case up.
Abolitionists have never written about you.
And even the SPCA doesn't seem to take
world cruelty to donkeys very seriously.
Donkeys of the world, unite. Strike. Form a union.
You must have had some wild, free ancestor **sometime**.
There was something here in Africa called the **quagga**,
but it's extinct, or nearly so, I'm told.
And, anyhow, you work.

And no one gives you
gratitude or love or even simple friendship.
I like to see you stamp your feet sometimes
and refuse to move, or kick wicked hooves backward,
but such behaviour's quite uncharacteristic of you
(despite that most unmerited reputation),
and you're always punished for it, with the switch
or the whip. You accede. And slog along
on those impossibly delicate small feet.
True, you have your simple pleasures. You eat grass
and shrubs and flowers and sometimes people's gardens
(with the grace and moderation inherent in you).
You gratefully drink the water of stream or well
with a thirst it seems even oceans could not slake.
You enjoy scratching your backside against walls.
You endlessly flick flies away with your tail

Hmaar (contd.)

You like to lean your heavy head on walls
as though the burden were too much. Too much!
And, very seldom, in your few free moments,
if set loose in a field, you will lie down,
roll over, and rear your hooves up in the air.
That's donkeys' joy, I guess, ass ecstasy.
But it's so rare. I'd like to have a farm
with thousands of freed donkeys, roaming fields,
and rolling, kicking hooves up to the sky.
But mostly, at work or free, you trot or stand
with those sad eyes, the bowed, bent neck and mien
(but the long, soft, silky ears pricked to attention),
and on your face (yes, it's a face, **not** a muzzle)
that odd grimace, half-stupor, as if to say (but how?):
"You think I don't know anything, but **I** know
that **you** don't know, and **you** don't know **I** know;
this is merely another of my incarnations,
the karma I'm expiating; I was once
something far different from the **hmaar** you see now;
someday you too are going to be a **hmaar**."
Well, maybe that's what Chesterton was getting at in his poem.
For it's true, Jesus **did** ride on an ass,
and from Giotto on, at least, the donkeys smiled.
And in mediæval mythology, always the donkey
and the ox (that other victim of our civility)
were the two required legal witnesses of the Birth.
And the donkey carried Mary and the donkey smiled.
You even have your church in Italy,
the Church of the Holy Donkey (where you came,
disgusted by the Crucifixion, having trotted
on those small feet, all across Palestine,
Cyprus, Greece, and the Mediterranean Sea!).
In the oldest temple carvings and tomb paintings
at Minya, Saqqara, Luxor, you're there row on row
of blue-grey donkeys, plodding to work in fields,
with lowered neck and head and sad black eyes,
carrying the corn and cane, carrying the **fellah**.
Pharaoh, of course, never rode on a donkey,
but then, he was a god. Once Pharaoh died,
mummified, and turned to dust; the donkeys survived
in endless rows, blue donkeys on a wall.

As I said, no one ever gives you affection,
encouragement, or even simply kindness,
though if one strokes your nostrils, neck or the silky
long lovely ears, you'll close your eyes in pleasure.
I have always wondered what my role in life was:

Hmaar (contd.)

perhaps I was born to be a donkey masseur;
maybe that's the karma that **I'm** expiating;
maybe I was a **hmaar** and am now moving upward
- for why do I like you so irrationally?
But are humans rational? You crave it. Every country boy knows
- in Brazil, Morocco, Guatemala, Greece -
that to fuck a jeune ânesse all one has to do
is go get another boy to stroke her nostrils
and ears, and one sticks it in her. Then take turns.
(Inevitably, considering the size of the asinine prick
she'll have little problem taking one's human one.)
But your reputation for lubricity
is as undeserved as those others for stupidity
and stubbornness. Otherwise, the world would be overrun
with donkeys, not with us hominids.
It's true, your males do have a massive member
(blame - or praise - Allah for that, and not the **hmaar**),
and though your menfolk perhaps seem to spend
an inordinate amount of time in a state of erection,
does one really think, if the human population of Cairo
or Marrakech or even Dublin or Winnipeg
were forced to parade in a state of permanent nakedness
the result would be very different? (Yes, maybe.
In Dublin they'd all be impotent from alcohol,
and in Winnipeg their penises would freeze.)
Anyhow, reader, if you judge I might want to be
a **hmaar** in my next incarnation simply because,
whether male or female, I'd either possess or take
that monstrous member, I can merely answer
that you are as frivolous as D.H. Lawrence.
My only desire is for experience.
Not necessarily to suffer. Or enjoy.
But to see. To feel. To know. And the **hmaar** knows.
The broken pride. The smile of resignation.
The silken ears
that will twitch
if you touch them.
And that bray
or prayer
cry
of timeless pain....

Barrio Chino

Mohammed, from Meknès, slept with me for money,
but he loved Elizabeth, out of Perpignan,
who was a prostitute, and also a lesbian,
and loved Alma, old whore born in Uruguay,
who loved me, because I knew her obscure country,
And I loved Abdelkader, from Algeria,
who lived with a Spaniard (who loved him), also slept with me for money and loved
- perhaps - someone, or no one at all.

(Note: The Barrio Chino is the low-life district of Barcelona - don't ask me to explain the name, because no Chinese at all live there or apparently ever did. This is based on a rather similar poem by the Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade, but is not a translation or imitation of it; rather, his poem provided me with the structure on which to stretch my own experiences.)

Invitation to the Feast

"Later," they told us, "later will be greater;
you will do brave deeds and visit distant lands;
future's a feast that we place in your hands;
true love awaits each patient masturbator.

"The roads you'll walk to reach there are sure, straighter
than those we followed; joy, fulfillment stand
in store for you; on the far, shining strand,
see, there's a boat for every navigator."

They did not say the strand was shifting sand
that buries both the lovers and the haters;
the roads, swamp; the sea, storm; the pure young satyrs
reach the feast appetiteless, old, unmanned.

And death, the smiling, blackjacketed waiter,
whispers at feast's end, "Later, baby, later."

Saskatoon

Sometime, late evening,
out of sunset and unending prairie,
an eastbound train pulled into Saskatoon.
Half-hour loading stop.

I walked a block to nearest beer parlour for a draft glass
(what else was there to do?),
and there, alone in the dim enamelled cavern, in a corner
to which custom or maybe law restricted them,
four young Métis drinking
Drunk.

I sat at the nearest table to them, seeking some kind of company,
gave my order to the perennial featureless waiter with his tray of glasses,
sipped my beer,
listened to the drifting inconsequential conversation
- alcohol, women, money, unemployment, hunting -
watching them.

Three had broad, sallow, swollen faces, half-closed eyes,
the lines already furrowing around the mouth:
defeat and resignation, too much drinking.

But one was as graceful as a cat crossed with a Frenchman
- high-cheekboned, high-hipped, high-wired, dark and slim:
when he talked, he danced.

He'd got to his feet to give the coup de grâce some fool argument
over how he was the best damn hustler in Saskatoon.

And he laughed, white teeth bared, as he said "Well,
anyhow, admit it:

I'm the best-goddam-looking hustler in Saskatoon."

(And you were, you were.)

But Saskatoon was just a half-hour loading stop,
and I was bound half a continent away,
so I drank my beer, walked out, walked back to the station,
boarded the train, and we chugged into darkness and distance,
and, for the rest of my days on earth, I imagine
that's all I will ever know about Saskatoon.

Deaths of Younger Men

When I hear of the deaths of younger men
- in car accidents, on motorbike and motorcycle -
hard godlike features, brown caramel bellies,
juicy genitals, smashed, forever past remending,
I sigh ambiguously.
For them, speed was everything, though what they intended
to do with all that time they gained I never
could understand.
I have always walked, gone slowly, never owned a car,
have borne in silence, their laughter, their lewd shouts,
their mockery
all my life.
There is time in life for everything, too much time.
"Ripeness is all."

Serenata

A church bell tolls; a child buys sweets; the restive
young men stroll, ogling girls; benches, unused,
are stone in laurel shade; bronze, unamused,
Juárez dictates to time his unread missive.

At marble tables they watch, under portals,
sipping their ices, the aged rich, the exiles
from life; **my** people, too, dreaming of boy-smiles
- all the old schemes of poor concupiscent mortals.

But as this thing expands, the boys one way,
girls another, it becomes the cosmic dance;
it's future generations now that prance
- nature's and chance's blind, sweet, deadly play.

And all the young men I will never know
are circling, circling round the **zócalo**.

(Note: Latin-American reminiscence - of Mérida, Yucatán, México, specifically. The "**serenata**" - literally, "serenade" - is the Mexican name for the evening stroll around the main square of the town - this square is always called the "**zócalo**" in Mexican towns - participated in, between the hour of 8 and 10 p.m., roughly, by all the inhabitants, but especially by the unmarried young men and girls, who circle in opposite directions, whispering compliments, greetings and the time and date of possible future assignations to one another as they reiteratedly pass one another. The **zócalo** of Mérida, like most of these town squares, is surrounded by arcaded shops - "**portales**" - and the bars and restaurants set up tables in the evening under the arcades for eating, drinking and people-watching. Juárez is, of course, Benito Juárez, the great 19th-century reformist president of Mexico; his "unread missive" is his statement, usually found engraved on all statues of him: "**Entre las naciones como entre los individuos, el respeto al derecho ajero es la paz**" - "Among nations just as among individuals, respect for the rights of others is peace.") (This poem is linked in mood with, was written about the same time as, and should be read alongside the Greek poem "Andrítsena: Painted Pictures.")

Tolling Bell: Hydra

A sobbing bell throbs like a broken heart
across the boat-white bay: sad, metal voice
ringing us the one message we've no choice
but hear, the one which with consummate art
we muffle: food, drink, sex all play their part,
and talk, work, politics, music, literature's noise,
masking the truth, these brightly-coloured toys
we play with, as we await the hangman's cart.

Cats in the plaza lead brief, stealthy lives;
donkeys stare, sightless; hills are sere and dark:
in their great amphitheatre like a shell
the small port glows, white introverted pearl.
Above, comets and constellations whirl;
here, tourists, natives stroll, children, husbands, wives,
against the night; each life a tiny spark
soon blown out by the wind that tolls the bell.

(Note: Hydra is a small arid waterless mountainous island near Athens. It is uninhabited except for a little, extremely picturesque port, much visited by tourists and with a colony of many foreign artists. Winds don't usually toll bells, of course, but Hydra is a very windy island.)

Poem Attributable to I. Layton

Do you ever wonder
about your friends
making it?
The hard cock pumping
the red cunt throbbing
reenacting a porno movie
you've seen too many times
already?
They, whom you've always known
as tweedy, urbane,
intellectual, respectable, even
religious!
Yet they have children,
and that's how children...
And as they grow older,
and lose their idealism,
as poets turn professors,
and idealists, politicians,
publicity men, realtors,
doctors, lawyers,
fucking the great cunt
or asshole of the world,
do you ever wonder
about your friends
making it?

Camalotes

As we called them in Latin America
small floating islands of water hyacinth

- that plant which the insane or astute British
finding it in South America, considered beautiful
and proceeded to export to rivers and lakes, throw navigation
a century back into the past. (Perfide Albion.)

Camalotes

floating downriver, upriver, depending
on the direction of tide and fortune. Always floating,

so much like the people of these countries, washed
on tides of hope and war and miracle.

Camalotes. I've known you in Brazil,
Colombia, Paraguay - now, half a world away,

in this strange sinking Venice with its riverside
palaces and shacks and bars we meet again, blaue Blume,

spiked, perfect tower

but the blue tower
which floated past me yesterday is not here
today.

"To watch the river made of time and water,
remembering time also is a river..."

...while the sound system projects
songs of my lost youth obviously chosen
to drive me mad or to drink or both.
"Never on Sunday." "Cuando calienta el sol."

"...When the sun heats our bodies on the beach
I feel your body tremble next to mine...."

A great black river-barge with its four eyes
of tyre-rings stares me down.

I feel the river move, the hyacinth
is blue now, more pure.

"Karma, karma, karma, karma, karma chameleon,
you come and go. You go and come...."

Camalotes (Cont.)

(Note: You may well believe that this thing was written under the influence of something, or at least, not in my normal state of mind, but I throw it in for the laughs. The British **did** discover the water hyacinth in its native South America, charmed by its blue flower, did propagate this noxious pest, visit botanical gardens and private plantings in the various British colonies, in most of the tropical world. It was King Chulalongkorn [Rama V, 1868-1910] who introduced it into Thailand. It grows and spreads uncontrollably, blocks up any body of water in which it is growing, disseminates itself in the form of floating islands, as indicated, and is good for absolutely nothing. "Perfide Albion" was Napoleon's term for England. The "blaue Blume", the blue flower, was the representation of the ineffable, of the ideal, unrealisable beauty or goal, like Poe's Eldorado, for the 19th-century German Romantic poets, especially Novalis and Eichendorff. Lines 21-22 are my translation of the opening lines of the poem "Arte Poética" by Jorge Luis Borges. Lines 27-28 are [again, my translation] from "Cuando Calienta el Sol," a Mexican popular song of the early 60's. Lines 33-34 are, of course, the refrain from Boy George's lovely song, "Karma Chameleon". And that dates the poem sufficiently.)

Afghani Love Song

There's a boy across the river with a bottom like a peach,
and I have to get to him!

There's a boy lives there that loves me, and he's **almost** in my reach, but I don't
know how to swim!

His bottom hides a precious pouch that's lined with Persian silk
with gold threads on the rim.

I want to pour within it pearls and opals white as milk;
I have to get to him!

The glaucous mountain water is as cold and quick as death,
but love is not a whim;

I love that boy, I need that boy, I dive, I hold my breath:
I have to get to him!

Our almond trees are soft pink snow; each love-bird calls to each.

But my eyes are growing dim;

there are lessons life can set you that a life alone can teach:

I don't know how to swim!

There's a boy across the river with a bottom like a peach,
but I don't know how to swim!

(Note: Lines 1 and 4, i.e., the refrain, of this famous and traditional Afghani folk song are quoted by innumerable writers on India and the Pashtuns of the Northwest Frontier - I have read them in M.M. Kaye, John Masters, Duncan Macneil - but nobody ever quotes the entire song, so I have decided to complete it, **à la manière**.)

The Slippers: El Salvador

I have a pair of slippers from El Salvador.
Brown fur slippers, skin of some unknown animal
- goat, possibly, from the stiffness of the hairs -
with rubber soles.
I bought them four years ago, I clearly remember,
from a corner stall in the little market square
near the Tica bus stop, in the hot morning,
and housewives laughed and chatted; piles of mangoes,
pumpkins and clothing lay under the **figus** trees;
and a green volcano loomed behind the city.
I bought them from a fat dark girl who sweated;
they'd attracted me by colour and lightness, seemed
(and were) at four **colones**, a great bargain.
They've accompanied me since then to twenty countries,
explored caves, climbed mountains, padded city streets
and lonely rooms, sat in sidewalk cafes
and watched the world pass by, gone on pick-ups, dates,
danced, kicked and run in fear; they walked with me
for two long months, in four jails and two prisons,
courtroom, courtyard, in the Land of the Morning Star.
They're old, torn, irreparable now, yet I still keep them
and wear them in my chamber, occasionally
step out with them to a neighbourhood bar or tavern
to give them air and a taste of life, poor nomads
from distant El Salvador.

In those four years, forty thousand people
have died in El Salvador
at the hands of Death Squad or Army, garrotted,
castrated, raped, beheaded, burned alive,
penises stuffed in mouths, cunts, anuses.
An archbishop was murdered at his altar
while saying mass; nuns and priests have been killed,
and teachers, students, babies, housewives, peasants.
How many of the boys I used to sleep with
- the beautiful dark boys without a thought
in their heads of anything but sex and music
I picked up at **El Faro** - how many of **them**
have died, I wonder. Most, I rather guess,
for this is a young men's war, against an oligarchy
and an old man. Forty thousand people dead!
And my slippers walk on. They got away.

The Slippers: El Salvador (Cont.)

(Note: I **do not** consider this - written in 1982 - a good poem, but include it for other reasons. The ferocious civil war in El Salvador, along with Guatemala possibly the most backward and repressive Latin America country and regime, has actually gone on intermittently since 1932, when the government of Maximiliano Fernández put down a peasant revolt with great loss of life: estimates range up to 50,000 deaths. Military governments have controlled the nation all through this fifty-five-year period.

The **Benjamin ficus**, or bearded fig, is a kind of banyan common in tropical countries. The **colón** is, or was, worth 40 U.S. cents. **El Faro** was a notorious night bar and gay and criminal hangout in the **Praviana** district of downtown El Salvador, one of the world's most dangerous cities, for all kinds of criminality. The archbishop murdered was Mgr. Oscar Romero, Archbishop of El Salvador.)

Cauchemars

True horses of the night, night mares, they come
unbidden, out of nothingness, implode
in the poor brain, wreck the frail peace, intrude
on your sweet sleep in the blue, darkened room.

They are the messengers of the common doom
we do not want to know. The phallic cloud
on the brightest day. The **revenant** in his shroud.
And no prayer serves but "Nada be Thy Name."

"A clean, wall-lighted place." An old man drinking
in a quiet bar. Night. Old waiter. Young waiter,
burning for bed and woman. It gets later,

but the leafy stillness concentrates one's thinking.
True horses of the night, the poems came,
and no prayer served but "Nada be Thy Name."

(Note: The reference is of course to Hemingway's most poetic short story, "A Clean, Well-lighted Place.")

On Reincarnation

If, as the Hindus claim, we have thirty thousand reincarnations, painfully climbing the ladder of being, groping and struggling toward **moksha**, toward that perfect union of **atman** with **Brahman**, granting that all this were so, it would still be a waste of precious life to spend even one of them in Canada.

(And I think 102 poems, or more, by other definitions [with obligatory 3% Canadian content], is/are quite enough.)

Re Your Minkey and that which is "Natural"

(The most dangerous adjective in the world: the RC church's excuse since the 13th century for oppressing us: we are "against nature")

Man and Nature (Matthew Arnold)

"In harmony with nature"? Restless fool
who with such heat dost preach what were to thee,
when true, the last impossibility:
to be like nature calm, like nature cool.

Know man has all that nature has, but more;
and in that "more" lie all his hopes of good.
Nature is cruel; man is sick of blood.
Nature is stubborn; man would fain adore.

Nature is tireless; man has need of rest.
Nature forgives no debt and fears no grave.
Man would be mild and with safe conscience blest.

Man must begin, know this, where nature ends.
Nature and man can never be fast friends.
Fool! If those canst not pass her, rest her slave!

(Note: And that about sums up my view of "nature" and the "natural" and the animal world. Vegetables are slightly superior. Minerals are best. Esp. stones.)

[Ed. Note: This was Ed's "gift" to me when he lived at Hillbilly Heaven, in Condet, East Jakarta. I only had three monkeys at the time, but they were spectacular actors: the fierce Mahmud, King of Beats... Miss Mina, aka "Shit Fur Brains" tiny and buck-toothed but with a fierce shrill shriek... and Charles Darwin, looking lost in thought as he spent the day masturbating. Like a lot of people I know, Ed did **not** sympathize with my fondness and amusement and attachment to simian primates.]

Let The Four Winds Blow

I hate the way they walk.
I hate the way they talk.
Won't someone understand
How much I hate this land!

Let the four winds blow,
let 'em blow, let 'em blow,
from east to the west,
I hate Canada the best.

I need wet old B.C.
like I need leprosy.
I need Saskatchewan
like I need stomping on.

Medicine Hat, Moose Jaw,
the mounties' rule of law,
Ontari-ari-o.
Do I want them? No.

I never gave a shit
for Québec's nervous fits;
as for the newfies-they
can join the U.S.A.,

The way we all soon will,
as we all someday will,
painlessly, assured
by some Baloney's word.

Because no one cares,
nobody really cares;

faint distant nostalgia
for Queen and la-di-da
drowned out by media.

People without a song,
dormant eight months long;
Autumn - re-death;
spring, summer - gone like
breath!

Irrelevant
and yet so self-content,
pathetic, smug
bugs in a rug.

Give me a **real** country,
with personality,
a people proud and free:
I'll take the poverty!

Let the four winds blow,
let 'em blow, let 'em blow,
from coast to coast
I hate Canada the most

[And of course with the usual
dose of corny irony dealt us by
the forces of fate, that's
exactly where my pal Ed Lacey
has ended up, old, broke,
crippled, and institutionalized, as well
as being pretty much out of marbles.
Ed.]

Appendices

BKK, 12 Oct. 1991.

Dear George and friends at A.L.T.! As you requested here is a report about LACEY, Edward. Edward was flattened by a passing vehicle on August 1 and has been out of intensive care for about two weeks now.

I went to see him yesterday. I did not know the ward he was in, so I wrote his name on a bit of paper and asked the first nurse I saw behind a desk to find him for me. 'Mai yoo: was the lazy answer. However, after some friendly abuse in sped-up English the green clad sister did put her finger out and yes, all smiles, we found him. An orderly was summoned to escort me to Edward's new residence. (My sister obviously didn't fancy I return after half an hour having not found the object of my enquiry). Figure this: Singapore on the day the Japs surrendered. You happen upon the sick bay of the P.O.W.s. Not a pretty sight, with the worst case, only two breaths from death..you guessed it, our mutual friend Edward. After some pretty rough prodding by the attending nurse, a friendly girl in her late teens, he opened one eye: Surprisingly revealing there still was Edward's spirit in there somewhere. "We can do better than that" said the nurse. She jammed his eyelid close. Curiosity got the better of Edward, so he opened his other eye to see what was going on. By now he realised that he had a visitor. So he had to open his lazy eye upon which the nurse let go and thus I could see the full, however vague resemblance of what once was bad boy Edward, who'd recite half a book every time you'd ask a simple question.

Now, Edward never was a bundle of muscular masculinity and I'd never seem him in his swimmers, but I figure he lost about half of his bodyweight. His left leg is still plastered up in a manner that makes you wonder if he'll ever walk again. (Which may be the only way to stop him from doing it again, by the way) To prevent him from doing any damage to the bits of medical equipment sticking out of his body, his hands are strapped to the bed, a straight jacket of sorts. Calling a nurse he cannot, because he can't speak. This is so because (I guess) of the fact that his voice cords are out of action: There is a hole in his throat. This was used to connect him up with his oxygen supply in intensive care. Why the situation is still the same, I don't know. I was told that once a day he manages to feed himself. It must be the only time that he has his hands freed. He has a lot of trouble keeping his food down and a lot of it comes bubbling back through this hole in his throat. This process appears to cause him quite a lot of strain and perhaps pain as well. As he tries to rid himself of excessive mucus his whole body contorts while he struggles to get his hands free. Nurse and orderlies keep a watchful eye as to the direction of his exhaust pipe, the crowded room. From time to time a nurse comes to his aid and with a plastic pipe and a suction device empties out the green slime, now, every time I hear someone coughing I get this compulsive image in which scores of people are blubbering up and ejecting green slime from holes in their throat. Perhaps I ain't cut out for the medical profession. As a matter of fact, I don't even think I am quite cut out to be a volunteer visitor to places like this! I did my best to ignore Edward's agony and proceeded to read him a comic story I had brought for him to read. Of course until now I didn't know he was still three quarters dead. He did enjoy my reading though, and I even noticed a happy smile on his face. His friend Dean is in Indonesia. I don't know for how long, and apart from the odd visit of one of the people where he was working, there are apparently no visitors at present. Anyhow,

the nurses tell me that he needs a lot of sleep, but they did kind of urge me to come more often...to bring condensed milk, talc powder and tissue, lots of tissue. Obviously he is sending the hospital broke on that score alone. My knowledge of Thai hasn't so far absorbed too many medical terms apart from 'chep'and 'mai sabai', so until I bump into his doctor I won't know more than what one can guess from observing him. The scars on his head, from the accident and from the brain surgery - to remove blood clots - is healing and I was told, that 'he is going to be all right'. How long that will take is anybody's guess, but all and sundry agree, that will be a long time yet. I think it will be about two weeks before I muster enough courage for another visit.

Meanwhile it would be very nice of you fellows, indeed, if you could send a get-well (or get-lost) card from his, eh, friends in Jakarta, signed' yours everready, the Jakarta vagrants pick-up service! Please address it to me, as I forgot to write Edward's exact address down: so I'll take it to him when I go there next time. It's halfway across to the other end of town, by the way, and while I was waiting for my bus back, I was wondering how my system was being affected by the billowing black exhaust fumes from passing traffic... and how many visits on, I'd need a throatpipe like our friend Edward. Now, a certain question remains unanswered: Will he have learnt anything from this experience? Maybe he was trying to write himself off for good and thus let's hope he does a proper job next time...

* = You and I. = *

On a Prehistoric Typewriter 27 Nov./8 Dec.. 1991

Dear George, Sunny, Sonny, Marc, Nick, Doug, Ibu Elly, in short EVERYBODY,
On behalf of rapidly recovering carcass belonging to a Lacey, Edward: THANKS A LOT....eh how about a cheque to pay for the bill (my bad joke)? Yours truly did overcome hospitalphobia and went to visit Edward several times, since my latest letter and report to you. Every time I saw him there he had improved 100% on the previous week. Last Sunday he was ready to escape but didn't quite know where to. (I mean really, who'd want some bandaged up hissing skeleton parked in front of the refrigerator eating you out of supplies?). But yes it is true, he swung his legs over the railing of his hospital bed when I asked him if he was already capable of moving around. Now, his body may somehow be getting better, but oh boy, his cranium rattles. One of the things he hissed to me was that he is now afraid to be shipped off to North Vietnam by the underground, seriously. I guess it doesn't help that his main contact with the Canadian Embassy is via a Thai national, who works there, so he believes the Vietcong has infiltrated his corps diplomatique.

So, now it's a matter of getting the Canadians to swallow a bit of their own red tape and get Edward to a decent hospital in Canada where with appropriate counselling by Alcoholics Anonymous and a psychiatrist, he may yet become semi-useful to whom it may concern. (KUMON be optimistic!!) As you can see from the snapshots, his leg is still in plaster. But what you cannot see is this neat square hole in the middle out of which his infected leg oozes some pretty nasty ooze. Now those guys who run the hospital must be getting slightly ill themselves as it is becoming clearer and clearer that they won't see any money for their services - at least not directly from their patient. Now, would you volunteer to operate that leg to fix it at your own expense, or would you hang on until "soon, soon" Mr Lacey was on his way home? So, needless to say, that Lacey could lose a leg. Now that may have significant benefits as it will prevent him from staggering from bar to bar on his next drinking-myself-to-oblivion spree.

Anyway, this humanitarian sucker has written a strongly hinting, nudging letter to the Canadians, putting it in short in such a manner, that unless they have him in the next mail, they are somehow going to feel responsible for the loss of his leg and the gain of his insanity. (I left out the bit that he would be a lot better off in a wheel chair). So, with a bit of luck, he'll be gone when I visit there next Sunday (going to church is marginally worse) Now, let's go and visit Edward at the Samsen Rd. hospital. On the way there, we stop off at a department store to buy a couple of yoghurts, a bar of chocklat and some other essential nutritious substances.

Oh, not to forget something to read (that's fun for all). The ride on aircon bus nr 5 is pleasant enough especially without the traffic jams - it's Sunday.

Now we are passing a hospital and the ticket conductor advises this is Samsen Rd, but we've been there too many times already, so we ignore the hint and stick it until the real destination appears outside the window, 90% obscured by closed curtains to keep the sun's heat out.

Off we go and walk past a number of stalls selling things I wouldn't think Edward would like ...turn left at the gate and go to the 3storey cranium unit. We take the body lift to the top floor and start looking for the recuperating corpse. Nowhere to be found. At least not anywhere near his last abode. They've shifted him again. No wonder he is getting paranoid in his condition. Which is: Well, first of all, he lost

most of his memory, that was including his name. This eventually returned to him, but he didn't know where he was for a long time. With nobody speaking his native tongue that's not difficult to fathom and what doesn't help much is the fact that he is as blind as a bat. I've tried to get him another spec set, but every time I make another effort to get the prescription he mumbles and hisses on about 70.3 and complex figures, I, as a speccarrier don't understand a bit of. I lent him mine, just to see how they'd match. Now he likes them: I had to tear them off his face to get them back. Now my specs are very simply minus 3, but trying to work this stuff out with Edward is just not within the realms of possibilities. Anyway, giving him something to read is fun, especially newspapers, because he grabs the paper like a monkey and nearly rubs his eyeball with it. Thus scanning, he inches his way over the paper, holding it upside down half the time.

Anyway, we find Edward in an overcrowded ward. Following the rule that the worse your condition is the better the facility - starting with intensive care- he must be regarded as 'well on his way to recovery'. It's actually quite easy to find him, because all and sundry are gesturing 'this way your féénd dtere. I, for some stupid reason, never take any heed of these indications probably because I spent a couple of years in Indonesia, where one soon learns to go in the opposite direction of the one that one is told. (And a lot of the time that holds true here as well).

So, when I find him I'm still, every time, sure it ain't him. 'See' I say to the air around me, You stupid ningnongs, this corpse is obviously a new parang. Wrong. After checking all the other wards - and boy a lot of those bodies look like recent excavations from Cambodia -I let myself get persuaded to believe that that yellow looking disorderly arrangement of skin and bones IS Edward. "How are you?" (said with the inevitable lack of real but with plenty of artificial enthusiasm). No answer, so I hand out the marsbar which disappears within seconds. "Do you like it" I ask hoping he'll say something. YESSSSSH he hisses, pulling his thin lips back over his teeth in some kind of (unintended) macabre grimace. I brought you some yoghurt, I say and pull the lid off the one with fruitsalad. Without further ado he holds the cup upside down until 85% is down his throat, 10% sits on his face and 5% remains stuck to the bottom of the container. What about another one I venture. Answer YESSSSSZH, same skeletal grimace, but now painted up with blobs of yoghurt. So down goes the strawberry one. I put the last close by to ensure the nurses won't pinch it.

(They offered to put the last lot in the fridge - got to be kidding, but would you believe it; Edward tells us hissing at a low ebb, that he has his own box in the fridge, how the fuck did he manage that, or is he fantasising again?). Oops it's time to get out of the road because we are having a mucus session. He hasn't got his hands tied up anymore, so why doesn't he cover his mouth? More in the bag? Yes the chips, 3 for the price of 2, all stuck together with sticky tape. I bite the first one open and try a mouthful, then Edward gets a hold of it, but he can't see where the opening is, so presently his bedsheet is getting covered in chips and salt. After four months on his back Edward is used to a lot worse, including lying for several hours in his own piss. That was one of the more obvious advantages of my visit this Sunday: I went to get him a new sheet, which we then covered with spice crumbs, smears of marsbar and blobs of yoghurt. A bit like when the baby's just getting toilet trained.

While the nurse is manoeuvring his lightweight skeleton about in that very professional fashion with which nurses handle you as well as bedlinen (Remind me,

just in case I am about to marry one) Edward is trying to grab her tits, but misses by miles, not because of lack of vision this time, but because our nursing sister knows exactly what this smartarse is up to. Then he gives her this I am-having-fun-my-little-sexobject-adolescent-death-warmed-up grimace which is carefully ignored by siss.

I've seen other recovering corpses being moved around and treated whilst visiting Edward, but all those guys have a great respect for their nurses.

Not so Ed, to him they are fair game. I suggest I get him a couple of girls from PatPong but the hypocrite reckons that that is not a good idea.

"You féén say he wan fuck me" confides the sister who carries an insignia indicating some kind of seniority. I am horrified and later I lecture that dirty piece of skin and bones. "If you want to get treated nicely here stop trying to jump these girls" I try, but it has no effect other than that Lacey asks me to go.... to tell the Embassy something, that will get him out of there but not to North Vietnam.

If I were his nurses, that's exactly where I'd send him.

Follow-up

My next was a week later. MY letter must have worked wonders I thought because Edward had gone...to the toilet (so, neither to Canada Nor North Vietnam). About 20 minutes later Edward came racing around the corner (all things are relative remember), hanging on like Charlton Heston to the front bar of his Chariot, bringing home the smells of the battlefield, large brown stains to show that we were still at the early stages of aforementioned toilet training. But victory within reach, or at least so it appears.

'Get me up' he had to ask me twice, since I was already presuming that he'd fully recovered. Off we went and I was thinking how big the world would be if we would all get around with those four-legged walking aid things...(the mind boggles). While he was on his stool mission the nursing sister told me in near perfect English, that Edward was going to see the optometrist the next day (Monday). So, here we are sitting on the hard wooden bench outside the ward and I am waiting for Edward to break the news to me about the visit to the eyeman tomorrow. But nothing of the sort. Did Edward at one time work for the secret service? Later he told me that he worked for the Canadian Public Service. Well, in certain ways that's one and the same thing. Needless to say that the manner in which things developed near the end of his employ there were not exactly of the kind that would make them feel like wanting to help Edward in any way. As it so happens these are the same guys that are involved in Edward's re (or de-)patriation. No doubt this is the same crowd who asked George where to send the remains to, way back in August.

Just comes to show that if you have any plans to return to a place you've spent time before, it may good idea to make sure that they don't hate your guts too much. Not that Edward had any of such plans...which is of course the reason for our chuckles over this little ironic twist. Why are you helping? Edward had hissed during a previous visit. I'd answered that it was my liking for bizarre entertainment, whereas in fact the main reason always was and still is to report to my friends at A.L.T. with whom I feel enough fraternity to entertain them with the story of the most despicable man who ever worked for A.L.T. and who without a doubt is best forgotten, unless of course a good deal of laughs can be generated

from hearing about him. And let's be fair: those pictures do make up for a lot don't they? For no other reason than for something to say I ask Edward about the optometrist. YESSSSSSZH he hisses (I think he always hissed his yeses) "Thank you very much" he says in a most important manner and shakes my hand for a long time, still holding on to it after he stopped shaking. "It is the letter you sent to them. Who did you address it to?" -Just the Embassy here in Bangkok and I am very pleased to hear the news.- Who is this guy Edward anyway? A letter from a friend that I find in his drawer talks about Edward's involvement in international literature, including translations from Spanish (Mexican poems) and a recent book (written by a Latino Gay activist). Hello, we are with the G team. Not that I did not know, just that nobody, including myself had ever spelled it out to me. And by the way I am not the type that seeks through people's drawers let alone their mail....unless of course by chance I find a photocopy of the last "report" I sent to George is sitting there looking at me while I am trying to find a spoon for his latest supply of yoghurt.

One stops at certain points on the way here. There is Dean with his cute but masculine handbag and the writer of this other letter, forgot his name something like Eaton or something, there is this black sheep bit and his personal contacts in Indonesia and next thing I know is how Easton likes hospitals because it appeals to the nurse inside him, whereas Edward has these traits in cycles. (That's NO news to us, now is it?) "I am definitely two person," he says and forgets to ask me whether I like either of 'm.

Dec. 16

Time to send this thing off..it'll be 1992 before I say BOO. Charming pictures aren't they? I thought it would cheer you up, no end, especially Sonny - am I right? 'Like that expression in the eyes? Looks to me like severe concussion, explaining his above average strange expressions.

The latest news on Edward's leg was that a peek through the window in his plastercast revealed a healed wound with no oozing anymore. Heaven beware he'll walk again. I bet he can't wait to get down to some serious catching up, after all it's five months. Oh well, I am hear Sonny say Heh Mick that's enough give the guy a break, if we all got punished for our sins like this we'd all be rolling around in wheelchairs if that...with the spirit of Christmas and all that, yes? O.K. guys that's it from me for 1991. Best wishes and have fun moving camp to the new location. Don't forget to send me an invite for the grand opening.

I haven't had time to go and see Edward again. By the time I get there he may have flown the coop already. Just as well I suppose, 'cause if he sees the photographs I took of him he'll probably have a relapse! Cheerio!

[Mick van Ness]

So many years in so many countries with so many close calls. Few are as sad, smart and tough as Ed Lacey was.

And for such a restless man, he was remarkably set in his ways. I remember when he and I were living with Marlin and Joe Sein in Byron Black's rented house in northern Bangkok. Lacey used to walk to the Weekend Market every Sunday morning. He told us that he took a short cut through the train yards but we all knew it was a long unpleasant walk. He usually couldn't get anybody to go with him, not that he really cared.

But one morning I decided to join him and he seemed glad to have my company. I was new to Asia and curious about everything; Lacey knew everything about everything and enjoyed playing the professor. We got along quite well. He was an opinionated and cantankerous conversationalist and a lot of what he said sounded like total bullshit to me. But he said it with such beautiful, compelling detail and such anguished conviction that I didn't bother to argue with him.

Lacey's short cut took us across the train tracks to a muddy trail that traversed a huge abandoned train yard, a steamy Third World urban wilderness. Once or twice a small boy passed us going the other way but mostly there were just broken bottles, rusty oil drums and swampy puddles littered with plastic bags.

After about fifteen minutes of walking and talking, a skinny yellow dog appeared on the path in front of us. The dog seemed to be stumbling backwards. It reeled, then sat and stared at us with dizzy eyes, judging the distance.

I stared back at this dog and wondered what was wrong with it. Suddenly Lacey whispered, "Let's go. Walk." He grabbed my elbow and led me away swiftly. After we got some distance on the dog, I realized what was wrong with it and then we started running and kept running until it was far behind us.

We slowed down when we saw a Thai man coming the other way and tried to warn him about the mad dog ahead. I tried in my rudimentary Thai and Lacey tried in pidgin English. The man looked at us like we were mad and walked on calmly refusing to accept our alarm.

"What do they do with rabid dogs in Thailand?" I asked Lacey.

"They don't do anything with them. They let them bite people and they let them die. They certainly don't kill them. This is a Buddhist country," he said.

This was Lacey when he was sober, Lacey the Cranky Professor. But when he was drunk he became something of a mad dog himself -- not as dangerous but just as reckless and inconsolable.

On day four of a week-long drunk, he'd be blabbering and slobbering with filthy clothes, greasy hair and swollen red bruises on his forehead and knees from falling on the pavement. He wouldn't know day from night. He'd rant at the Thai neighbors in Hindi and Portuguese. ("They can understand if they want to.") And after he'd

exhausted himself, he'd sit in brooding silence and chain smoke with quivering hands.

We simply couldn't do anything for him when he was like this. When we tried to clean his wounds he'd bark, "No! Leave them alone; they will heal." One time Marlin and Joe got so fed up with picking him out of the gutter (and apologizing for him to the police) they tied him to a pillar in his bedroom. But he looked so pitiful they finally let him go out and drink some more.

It seemed to me at the time that Lacey didn't have long to live. I was sure he'd soon be run over by a truck or have his throat cut. That was 1988 and somehow he survived one close call after another. Self-abuse only made him stronger. He had an iron constitution from years of travelling on the cheap in the Third World; he thrived on cigarettes and snacks from street vendors. And his wounds did heal by themselves.

But when he wasn't the drunken mad dog or the Cranky Professor, Lacey could be a charming and fascinating companion. I have a very fond memory of a day we spent together in Penang. I ran into him by chance when we were both down there renewing our visas. Together we toured Penang's mosques, Hindu and Chinese temples, the Church of England and that Taoist park built by the Tiger Balm magnate.

We walked and talked for hours. Lacey was like a kid, irritated or enthralled by everything he saw. Every site spurred a reminiscence of something he had seen or done some other place in the world. He discoursed on religion and colonialism, told me of love-affairs with Sri Lankan and North African boys, complained about how rude the Chinese are, described a mountain train ride through the Andes.

At the end of the day we bought beef satay and noodles at an outdoor market. I remember sitting at a rickety metal table and having my ankles attacked by red ants whose nest was directly under my stool. Lacey was amused but unconcerned and continued to expound his theory that the concept of reincarnation could only have originated in the tropics. I wish I could have spent more times like this with him.

As the resident heterosexual in the house with Lacey and Byron, I was never tempted by the parade of relaxed, curious and ready boys who passed through. But I did see the great advantage to being gay in Southeast Asia: freedom from the conventions, responsibility (and guilt) of sexual relations between men and women. Moreover, I saw in Lacey and Byron two very different manifestations of homosexuality -- the goofy and the melancholy.

For Byron, being gay in Thailand was like a circle jerk at a boy's endless summer camp. He frivolously and wantonly coaxed orgasms up from the Great Cosmic Joke, tickling the egotistical seriousness of men and boys whenever he could.

But for Lacey, I believe, sex was like the scream of insects in a tropical night. It was a furtive and intense closeness to the world of men from whom he otherwise felt so isolated. More than desire and release, sex was a kinship of pathos and suffering.

Lacey once told me of an experience he had at the Stockholm Hotel in Bangkok. At the Stockholm boys and girls were available to perform private sex shows in the

guests' rooms. It seems the two boys Lacey picked out had gotten into an argument in his room over which one of them was going to be on top. He described what happened next with a sad smile that expressed an odd mix of lust and sympathy:

"They didn't mind fucking but neither of them wanted to be fucked. You see, they weren't really gay boys. So I let them both fuck me."

Jourdan Arenson
San Francisco,
New Year's 1993

39 Helena Ave.
Toronto, Ont. M6G 2H3
Canada

6 September 1992

Dear Byron:

This is another of my form -- but I hope informative -- letters to the friends of Edward Lacey.

After Edward's return to Canada in late January, he stayed with me and my family in Scotsburn, Nova Scotia, apart from a month spent in Sutherland-Harris Memorial Hospital, Pictou, N.S. where he underwent physical and occupational therapy. After considerable liaison with the welfare authorities in Peterborough, Ontario, and with his cousin Don Blanchard in Lindsay, I flew with him to Toronto in early May. Since that time he's been in Peterborough. In the meantime I have moved to Toronto and on 1 September I, as well as my wife, son, and standard poodle, visited Edward, presenting him with books, magazines, and cold cuts. I spoke briefly with his social worker and the administrator of his current residence.

Edward's time in Peterborough has been eventful. The first month he spent in (1) the Brock Mission which, according to him, was "hell," possessing the traditional attributes: noise, crowdedness, and incessant prodding by "devils", Edward's word for the evangelical Protestant clergy who ran the place. They went so far as to confiscate his copy of Gay Roots, Vol. I, though it was returned to him when he left. He was then in (2) an apartment program from which he was ejected for smoking (3) an expensive suite while the authorities decided what to do with him next (4) a rooming-house where he received meals on wheels but, on his first day there, he fired his homemaker/bedmaker. Currently he is residing at (5) the Fairhaven Home for Senior Citizens, 131 Langton st. Peterborough, Ont. K9H 6K3, Tel. (705) 743-4265, Fax 705-743-6292. Because he was under 60 years of age, the administrator, Ms. Dawn Straka -- with whom I was quite impressed -- said it was quite a bureaucratic struggle to gain the provincial government's permission to admit him. It's a large, bright, relaxed sort of place.

Though hardly euphoric, Edward was in reasonably good spirits, lucid, and obviously glad to see us. He's quite satisfied with his present accommodations and with the staff there. He sees his cousin Don infrequently, and the rest of his Lindsay relatives not at all. Physically, he is a little unsteady on his feet, but is otherwise in good health. When he arrived in Peterborough, he wanted to live as independently as possible. However, on the occasions when he ventured out from where he was staying, he became confused and had to be shepherded back. He's now reluctant to go out by himself. And his loss of what I call sequential memory remains very real. Apart from a diary he kept for a while, he has not written poems or letters or anything else.

While my family otherwise occupied themselves, I took Edward downtown, and absorbed his two, or possibly three, **idées fixes**. He believes that he properly belongs in Asia, and at some point should return there. He considers himself a Catholic in Canada, and should be among Catholics rather than Ontario Protestants. Corollary to that, he thinks that he should be in Quebec -- not just because of its nominal Catholicism, but because it is French, and English "is becoming more and more alien to me." Though he loathes Canada, Quebec at least would be tolerable, I gather.

Ironically, as we were returning to his room, I pointed out some computer print-outs taped to the wall, each of which was a brief passage beginning, "I love Canada because...." Some devil in me observed that this must be extremely nice for him to see each morning. We then came to a cleaning-woman's cart parked in the hall, on which were mounted two miniature Canadian flags. When I pointed **these** out, Edward yanked one from its mooring, crumpled it up, and tried to tear it apart in his teeth! He failed. Canadian flags, even tiny ones, are tough.

What's next? On the publishing front, at least, the news is hopeful. Winston Leyland in San Francisco will publish several of Edward's poems in **Gay Roots**, Vol. II, and in Jakarta, Byron Black intends to release Edward's poetry collection, entitled **Third World**. As for Edward himself, within six months he may be entering the brain injury program at Chedoke-McMaster Hospital, affiliated with the medical school at McMaster University in Hamilton, about 40 miles west of Toronto.

I will of course see him again,

Yours cordially,

Fraser Sutherland

3 October 1993

Dear Byron

On 19 Sept. I had some business in the Ottawa area so I, Alison, Malcolm, and our standard poodle Darcy (whom Edward in Nova Scotia used to refer to as "a European heiress down on her luck", mistaking the gender but not the overall impression of the animal) drove to St. Isidore, where we saw Edward Lacey **in situ**. He was glad to see us -- and our tribute of books and magazines -- though in my own case he did a reasonably good job of pretending not to be. We took him for a drive and I was pleased to see his legs were sturdy enough to bear up under a walk in the country -- an improvement on when I saw him last Christmas. The staff knew we were coming and made sure he was bathed, was going to be properly dressed etc. in anticipation of our arrival. To their mortification, and with the contrariness that is Edward's second nature, he made sure he was unshaven, wearing pyjamas etc.

St. Isidore is a roadside hamlet in the St. Lawrence lowlands, and Villa Lapalme itself much smaller than Fair Haven, less "institutional", and pretty much entirely Francophone. The standard of care looks pretty good to me, and the staff obviously takes an interest in the extra-terrestrial in their midst. M. Courteau, for example, at his own expense buys Edward a daily **Globe and Mail** -- so much for being "sinister"! The staff is much impressed by the mail and telephone calls Edward gets. (I was pleased to hear that he had a visit from his old friend Henry Beissel and Gary Geddes, who live fairly nearby.) He still hasn't written anybody, as far as I can tell. Though full of gripes and grievances and still indulging in such pleasantries as terming his fellow patients "sub-humans", Alison thought he was more level-headed and realistic than when she'd last seen him. We all agree that the sooner he gets therapy the better. Stumbling progress is being made in that direction.

Although we -- including of course Edward -- also agree that intellectual stimulation, such as that found in a big city like Toronto, would benefit him, the consensus is that another move soon would severely set him back again mentally. Then, too, a move means starting from point zero: you must appreciate that when he changes residence communication instantly becomes a nightmare, red tape proliferates, and nobody knows nothin'. The shift from Peterborough certainly proved so. Much to my relief, Alison dedicated herself to sorting out the mess, and has just managed to do so. She's been in frequent touch with M. Courteau, with Edward's doctor in St. Isidore, and with other parties, including Edward's social worker back in Peterborough. It all takes a sizeable chunk of her time, and pays decent dividends to the shareholders of Bell Telephone...

[About **THIRD WORLD**:] My only additional comment might be that it needs a line or two to indicate that Edward is far from being physically dead, whatever may be true in the spiritual realm. Something to answer the raised question: "The guy got wrecked in Bangkok. So what happened to him next?" Perhaps a line saying something like: "Ed was repatriated to his hated **pays** and is now a resident in an Ontario convalescent home." You get the idea.

Yours cordially,

Fraser Sutherland

[So be it - Ed.]

For E.A.L.

This is your country
Canada hater
as much as you fight it
it will follow

The snow that froze you out
froze you to the bone
is always with you
vehemently neutral, validating

Your skin's full transparency
to the plural, the quick
tingling as you walk

the far roads oceanic
wherever you are
think of us here
your creditors

[Fraser Sutherland]

Traveler

All he does is eat, drink, pursue shoeshine boys,
frustrated
at not living long enough
to have all of them
Literature is a fad, masturbatory unserious.

He's found where day and night converge,
lapsing into childhood,
witness to black and blue and a jailhouse bunk.

He is in fact a child
whose milk has curdled.
He finds in brazen arms
the graven image of too many years.
His shrilling mother's dead.

The trouble with mothers
too much flesh bringing you back.
His aunts the nuns are dying.
Extremes of warmth and cold.

Was the judge who sentenced Timothy Leary
and sentenced you the
bottled-hummingbird father
forever saying no?
Did they come from the same town?

His face to the sun,
he loses them.
The sun is a man.
Sometimes in the fluid night
he is submerged.

His mania is lists
but he never adds them up.
He likes roe, eggplant, pomegranate
many-seeded liquid sex.
He loves and hates his path of snow.

He slides across the eyelid of a lover
sweat shimmer to the Brownian movement
of bright day, the beach boys
of Copacabana. They exploit
and are exploited.

I suppose he finds the heart of the rose
in a boy's tattoo.

Traveler (cont.)

Determined fingers climb
the muscle diatonic,
the scales of touch.

I have looked for him
and go on looking:
a bar in Delhi
or Rio de Janeiro.
They know him in all the embassies.

His hotels wander
his letters circumnavigate
and the desk-clerk says, oh,
yes, he was here
but now he's gone.

The train waits but
he's further down the line.
He stays ahead of the plane he's on.
Shedding books and clothes, he travels light,
riding the molecules of dusty skins.

He may be many things:
the dolphin of the boy bars,
a cruising shark.
His smoked glasses
reflect ice.

Some day he'll join us,
the many and the one,
row on row of us
and the last dead man --
it will be him.

[Fraser Sutherland]

Production Notes

The poems that were written over a number of years, on the road, and which have become **Third World**, were mostly written on an ancient portable typewriter, annotated with a great deal of longhand (in the famous crabbed style Edward allegedly developed when he was writing letters from Mexico - and being charged postage by the page!)

The Editor was handed a photocopied set of these poems, by the poet, in mid-1990, with the casually growled instruction to do with them as he pleased. That he has, and you hold the humble fruit of our effort in your hands. Several friends, who kindly helped with proofreading and advice, suggested I publish a somewhat more abbreviated version of this collection, but inasmuch as the poet has apparently conked out (opted out), I release it here as he gave it to me, in the same order, and with absolutely minimal editing. The reader thus has the opportunity to "edit"... reading it bit by bit, one would imagine, while on the road in "the Third World".

The book did not come to fruition quickly. It actually wasn't until 1992, and the near-fatal accident and departure from the scene of the crime by the poet, that serious efforts began to get it into shape for publication, which eventually came to pass at the end of 1993.

I. Gusti Ngurah Mertawibhawa, a Balinese friend of the Editor's, entered the entire script onto WordPerfect 5.1. More power to him for that: the combination of shaky English, and numerous exotic symbols and diacritics peppered throughout the manuscript (not to mention all the names of places and people, many long vanished, that were all but impossible to check for spelling) made it quite a job for the stalwart Merta. That he completed the task so skillfully is to his great credit.

This work was done at the Condet, East Jakarta, forest hideout of Baron Infinity and the Black Monkeys. The Editor went through Merta's draft, checking and correcting, and adding the Introduction and Appendices. Any errors in spelling, grammar or usage are his and his alone (unless you want to blame the poet for those which he originated, and were faithfully carried into the volume). I do not, by the way, consider myself a real editor, and would have gladly ceded the task to another, but it has devolved to me, as a final expression of friendship and admiration, to put it out in this cheap, rough form.

There was actually some question as to who **would** see this work into print. It would have been a pleasant surprise to get a grant, or interest a publisher, but nobody came across, neither those who have previously published Ed's works (and taken advantage of his talent), nor any literary authorities in the Realm of the Snow Queen: in the end, the Canadian taxpayer escaped unscathed.

The book is therefore going into print, in the absolutely cheapest and plainest form, but one appropriate to, and Made In, THE THIRD WORLD.

Byron Black

Blacky's Image Lounge
Post Office Box 1211 JKS
12012 Indonesia

Telephone +62.21.841.4175
Pager +62.21.13011 - ID 66955
FAX +62.21.8779.8662
HP +62.815.895.8831

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